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Seaweed as a Functional Food

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The Seaweeds are macrophytic algae, a primitive type of plants lacking true roots, stems and leaves. Seaweeds are wonder plants of the sea and highly useful plants. Asia stands as the world leader in seaweed cultivation and more than 80% is contributed by China, Korea and Japan. Only recently, seaweed cultivation is picking up in certain coastal districts of the Tamil Nadu state. Seaweeds used for production of Agar, Alginates & Carrageenan. Chemicals from brown seaweeds such as alginic acid, mannitol, laminarin, fucoidin and iodine have been extracted successfully on a commercial basis. In recent years, much attention has been directed towards foods or food components that promote optimal health and reduce the risks associated with diseases/disorders in the humans than identifying and correcting nutritional deficiencies. Food shown to provide specific health benefits to humans and improve quality of life is known as "functional foods". Seaweeds are considered as functional food supplement of 21st century and the demand for food supplements from seaweeds has increased many folds in overseas mainly because of wide usage in food, confectionary, textiles, pharmaceuticals, dairy and paper industries. Multifunctional applications of seaweed is mainly due to its diversified nutrient content such as sulphated polysaccharides, dietary fibre, proteins, minerals and vitamins as well as certain bioactive compounds with antibacterial, antiviral, antifungal properties. Abundance of gelling, thickening, emulsifying, binding, stabilizing, clarifying and protecting agents known as carrageenans, alginates and agars in seaweed further extend their applications. This presentation would focus on the scientific facts about seaweeds as a functional food and its health benefits.

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