

Sweet Potatoes Pack Lots of Nutrients

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Although Valentine's Day is over, let's continue the heart-smart celebration, as February is also Sweet Potato Month. Including sweet potatoes in meals promotes heart health, especially when we learn to prepare them without loads of butter and marshmallows.

Sweet potatoes first originated about 5000 years ago in the tropical Americas. Early explorers, including Christopher Columbus, introduced these edible roots to Europe and Asia. Today, experts tell us China is the world's largest grower of sweet potatoes. However; we find sweet potatoes growing in the U.S., primarily in Southern states, including Florida. Realize sweet potatoes are not yams as true yams are native to Africa, nor are they potatoes. Potatoes are tubers and sweet potatoes are roots. One thing sweet potatoes are, is nutrient rich!

The North Carolina Sweet Potato Commission calls sweet potatoes the "Vegetable with Super Food Powers." It is definitely a nutrient dense vegetable; meaning for the calories it contains it's loaded with nutrients. The sweet potato is fat and cholesterol free and contains very little sodium. It is a complex carbohydrate veggie which means the body digests it more slowly than a simple carbohydrate food and therefore doesn't cause blood sugar to spike.

One cup of sweet potatoes contains about 180 calories. As an excellent source of dietary fiber, especially if you eat the skin, the sweet potato helps to promote a healthy digestive tract. Sweet potatoes also contain niacin, folate, and iron. This vegetable is a very important source of vitamins A and C and potassium. Remember sweet potatoes that are the brightest orange in color contain the most beta carotene. Beta carotene is changed in the body to make vitamin A. This nutrient is very important for good vision, immune function and skin and bone health.

Unfortunately, we often see sweet potatoes only at holiday meals, but they are too good (taste and nutrition) to be assigned only to the Thanksgiving table. The challenge is to prepare this nutrient loaded vegetable without all the butter and marshmallows we often see in holiday recipes.

Canned, frozen or fresh, sweet potatoes are available all year. Sweet potatoes can be prepared with sweet or savory flavors. Although they may be eaten raw, sweet potatoes are usually cooked. They go well with meats, fruits and other vegetables.

There are two basic types of sweet potato; moist (orange) and dry (yellow). The moist variety is the most common type. The dark orange variety is plumper in shape and is sweeter than the dry sweet potato. The dry variety has a pale colored flesh and is low in moisture content. Choose firm to medium sized sweet potatoes with smooth skins. Avoid sweet potatoes with insect damage, cuts or other problems with the skin.

Sweet potatoes have a thin skin that is easily damaged. Don't keep sweet potatoes in the refrigerator. They should be kept in a cool, dry, dark place and used within about three weeks. Scrub sweet potatoes well under cold running water before cooking. There are countless recipes calling for sweet potatoes; check out the Fruit and Veggies More Matters website, <http://www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org>, to find a few new ideas.

My favorite way to eat sweet potatoes is to cook them whole in a microwave oven. After they are cleaned thoroughly, I pierce each potato several times with a fork. Then place them on a paper towel in the center of the microwave oven. The cooking time for two medium potatoes is between 5 and 9 minutes. For four sweet potatoes the cooking time is about 10 – 13 minutes. Let the cooked potatoes stand for five to 10 minutes. I like my sweet potatoes plain or with maybe a sprinkle of cinnamon. The skin is full of nutrients and good to eat.

You can boil, bake, roast, grill or steam sweet potatoes, no matter the cooking method, just plan to use them frequently as a side dish to any meal.

Sources:

Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Network; <http://panen.org/>

North Carolina SweetPotato Commission; <http://www.ncsweetpotatoes.com/>

University of Nebraska, Lincoln Extension, Nutrition Education Program; <http://lancaster.unl.edu/nep/>

University of Illinois, Extension; <http://urbanext.illinois.edu/veggies/>

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