

THE HEALTH NUGGET



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Spud Love

Let's face it, potatoes have gotten a bad rap. Popular protein-emphasized diets have placed the spud at the bottom of the totem pole. From their perspective, potatoes are little more than a fat producer that should be kept at a minimum in the diet. But are potatoes really all that bad?

Potatoes became a staple of western civilization only 250 years ago. Cultivated in the mountains of Central and South America for thousands of years, it was an important part of the Inca's diet. Spanish Conquistadors, in search of riches, found edible golden nuggets—potatoes—and shipped them back to Spain in the 1530s.

It is reported to have taken a few hundred years for their popularity in Europe to become substantial.

Though Sir Walter Raleigh was one of the first to plant the potato in Great Britain, "it is said that he knew so little about it that he tried to eat the berries, and on discovering their noxious character, ordered the plants to be rooted out."¹ It was thus that the gardener then found the valuable, wholesome tubers.

With its skin, a medium-size potato has only 130 to 140 calories, virtually no fat and 4 grams of fiber. It beats bananas in its potassium content and amazingly is a source of vitamin C, the B vitamins, iron, calcium, manganese, phosphorus and magnesium. Amazingly, the potato possesses high quality protein, providing all but one of the essential amino acids.

While we are most familiar with the russet potato, rich-hued potatoes such as red or purple provide extra phytochemicals such as beta-carotene and lutein. Researchers have found that some deeply col-

ored varieties can be as rich in antioxidants as kale, Brussels sprouts and spinach.

Medicinally, potatoes have been reported to pack a powerful punch as well. My own father remembers as a child experiencing the benefits of a grated raw potato poultice for a severe burn.

Dr. P.V. Naryanan, a plastic surgeon of Jubilee Mission Medical College, in Thrissur, Kerala, India, has discovered this use of potato in his practice as a plastic surgeon. He learned of its advantages from Dr. M.H. Keswani who had been experimenting with potato peels for years. They affirm that the potato peels provide moisture and do not dry out quickly; have anti-bacterial properties that help in healing burn injuries and do not stick to the wound when removed. The juices in the peel keep the wound moist. Perhaps this helps speed up the healing process. A dry wound is very painful and takes longer to heal.²

According to the British Broadcasting Corporation, researchers have discovered *kukoamines*, chemicals found in many common types of potatoes which lower blood pressure.³

Latin American folklore embraced the potato as a cure for arthritic and inflammatory problems. Centuries later, the British would place a raw potato in a pocket next to an inflamed joint. Ladies had special bags or pockets made in their dresses in which to carry one or more small raw potatoes for the purpose of avoiding rheumatism. Sprains and bruises have also been successfully treated by potato-juice fomentations. Some have used potato juice in the treatment of rheumatism, gout and stomach ulcer.⁴ During World War I a group of German soldiers near starvation, were

forced to live on raw potatoes. The soldiers with gastric disorders were relieved and cured. After the war, Dr. J.F. Magerl began treating gastric patients with raw potato juice. After 10 days of the treatment, most of the patients showed no symptoms.⁵

On any given day about half of all Americans eat potatoes in some form. "In some form" is the problem, however, when we realize that two-thirds of these potatoes are processed. The single biggest use of potatoes is frozen French fries, used primarily at fast-food restaurants. Potato chips, pre-made hash browns or tater tots loaded with grease are also common forms of potato consumption. In this way, potatoes are indeed contributing to the obesity epidemic in the U.S.

Look at how quickly the calories stack up:

One 5 oz potato, baked, has 135 calories and 0 grams of fat

- with 2 T. butter/margarine: 335 calories, 22 grams of fat
- with 3 T. sour cream and 2 T. butter: 425 calories, 31 grams of fat
- Potato salad, 5 oz: 220 calories, 13 grams of fat
- Hash browns, cooked in oil/butter, 5 oz: 265 calories, 13 grams of fat
- French fries, fast-food, medium, 5 oz: 435 calories, 21 grams of fat
- Potato chips, 5 oz: 750 calories, 50 grams of fat.

Buying your potatoes fresh and preparing them yourself will automatically make you more aware of how the calories add up and how you can prepare them as nutritiously as possible.

Potato sections which are green-tinged should not be eaten. The chlorophyll is a sign that the potato has been exposed to too much light after harvest. It also indicates that *solanine* (a naturally occurring toxin) may be present in increased amounts, especially in that area. Solanine is a substance found in nightshade plants, including tomatoes, white potatoes, all peppers (except black pepper) and eggplant. In theory, if it is not

destroyed in the intestine, solanine could be toxic. It has been hypothesized that some people may not be able to destroy solanine in the gut, leading to osteoarthritis. Eliminating solanine from the diet has been reported to bring relief to some arthritis sufferers in preliminary research. Proponents claim exclusion of solanine requires up to six months before potential effects can be seen.⁶

Organic potatoes, if affordable are the best option. If organic is not an option, it has been advised to peel the skin away. According to a Cornell study, "potato peels harbor significant amounts of chemical residues that may be mildly toxic." Before harvest, most potatoes are inoculated with chemical sprout inhibitors. Shown to have mild toxic effects in animals, the chemicals remain on the skins in amounts four times greater than government guidelines, said Nell Mondy, professor of nutritional sciences at the College of Human Ecology. "Our studies indicate, . . . that the peels of dry or moist-cooked potatoes retain up to 20 times more sprout inhibitor residue than the pith (inside) of the potato."⁷

Having Irish roots, James feels that his love of potatoes is inherited. But since the Hispanics consumed the potato long before, I think I am more entitled. Either way, the potato, when prepared simply, free from spice and grease will continue to be a part of the most healthful diet.

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