A Bowl of Cherries: Rich in Antioxidants, Melatonin

The Folklore: While we'll likely never know if young George Washington really used his hatchet on that famous cherry tree, it is known that, to Victorians, cherry trees symbolized education, and the white cherry, deceit. The cherry has also been associated with virginity from ancient times, probably because the red-colored fruit enclosing a seed symbolized the uterus.

The Facts: Sweet cherries (Prunus avium L., a relative of the plum) date back to the Stone Age; archaeologists have found cherry pits in many caves and prehistoric cliff dwellings. Cherries were cultivated in the U.S. as early as 1629. The U.S. now leads the world in production of sweet cherries, which range in color from light peach to the deep wine of Bing cherries, by far the most popular.

One cup of sweet cherries provides about 90 calories, 10% of the Daily Value for vitamin C and three grams of fiber. But the biggest potential health benefits of cherries probably come from phytonutrients. Cherries are rich in antioxidants, such as quercetin, anthocyanins and ellagic acid. Cherries also contain beta-sitosterol, a cholesterol-lowering compound.

The Findings: Russel Reiter, Ph.D., a researcher at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, who has been studying melatonin for years, has found cherries—especially tart cherries—to be incredibly rich in the hormone, which affects sleep patterns and has been promoted as an anti-aging supplement.

The Finer Points: Cherries do not ripen further after being picked. Choose firm, plump, shiny cherries with green stems; avoid those that are soft or have brown spots. Cherries are highly perishable; keep refrigerated until eaten. For highest quality, eat within a day or two. They can be frozen whole with stems. Simply rinse and drain well, spread in a single layer on a baking sheet and freeze until firm. Then pack in plastic freezer bags or containers and refreeze immediately. For recipe conversions: one pound of fresh cherries yields about two cups pitted cherries.

Be on the lookout for cherry juice, available in some health food stores and farmers' markets, or cherry juice concentrate, being test-marketed in some areas. Cherry juice retains the antioxidants and melatonin of the fruit.

Resource Corner

Get Skinny the Smart Way
by Annette B. Natow, Ph.D., R.D. and Jo-An Heslin, M.A., R.D.

Despite its name, this book is not about getting skinny, it's about getting healthy. And the authors—both members of EN's Editorial Advisory Board—succeed in that aim. They teach the reader how to make sensible food choices and become more active to lose weight. For many overweight people, losing just 5% to 10% of their current weight can get them healthy, though not necessarily skinny.

The book can help you take control of what you eat in a world where "Big Gulp," "Value-Sized" and "Grande" have become the norm. It is loaded with practical information, and no food is off limits. The catch? You must choose commonsense portions to help you cut calories. Guidelines are given.

Over 50 recipes are included, plus sample menus. The authors ease you into gaining control of your own meal planning by week three. Activity goals and illustrations of simple strength-training and stretching exercises are included.


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