Chickpeas, Garbanzos: The Same Nutritious Food

The Folklore. The ancient Mesopotamians may have cultivated chickpeas 11,000 years ago because they believed these legumes boosted performance under stress and enhanced ovulation. Spanish and Portuguese explorers eventually introduced chickpeas to other lands.

The Facts. Chickpeas, also known by their Spanish name garbanzos, get their Latin name, Cicer arietinum, from the word for "small ram," which some say describes the shape of the chickpea. Today, chickpeas are grown in India, Pakistan, Turkey, Ethiopia and Mexico, as well as the northwestern U.S. They are widely introduced chickpeas to other lands.

Chickpeas are high in soluble and insoluble fibers. They are also rich in manganese and molybdenum, trace minerals required by several energy-producing metabolic enzymes. A half-cup of chickpeas supplies more than 20% of the Daily Value for the B vitamins folate and B6.

The Findings. Numerous studies on the health benefits of a Mediterranean-style diet have linked diets rich in legumes like chickpeas to less risk of death from heart disease. Researchers surmise that the fiber, vitamin and mineral profile of chickpeas contributes to their protective effect.

Australian researchers compared the effects of supplementing the diets of adults with either chickpeas or wheat. They found that blood levels of total and low-density lipoprotein ("bad" LDL) cholesterol, as well as blood sugar and insulin levels dropped more after six weeks of eating chickpeas than after eating wheat.

Studies of mice suggest that chickpeas also may help suppress the formation of precancerous lesions in the colon.

The Finer Points. Chickpeas have a firm texture and a distinct nut-like flavor. Dried and canned chickpeas sold in the U.S. are typically beige in color, although black, green, brown and red chickpeas are also cultivated.

Fresh green chickpeas are found in some natural, Hispanic and Middle Eastern food stores. The taste is similar to edamame (steamed soybeans) and the chickpeas can be tossed into a salad or steamed and lightly salted for a snack. Indian markets sell cooked, dried, seasoned chickpeas as a snack food.

Canned legumes are convenient and just as nutritious as fresh. But be careful of the high sodium content. When buying them dried, shop at a store with a high turnover to ensure they are fresh. You may need to sort through them to remove small stones before cooking. Presoaking shortens cooking time and reduces any gassy tendencies.

—Mindy Hermann, M.B.A., R.D.

Notable Nutrients

(1/2 cup canned, drained chickpeas)

Protein: 5.9 grams (12% DV)
Vitamin B-6: 0.6 milligrams (20% DV)
Folate: 60.4 micrograms (20% DV)
Copper: 0.2 milligrams (10% DV)
Manganese: 0.7 milligrams (34% DV)
Molybdenum: 90 micrograms (200% DV)

EN’s Own Curried Chickpeas

1 tablespoon peanut oil
1 medium onion, finely chopped
3 garlic cloves, minced or crushed
1-2 tablespoons curry powder (to taste)
1 cup diced tomato
2-15- or 16-ounce cans chickpeas, drained and rinsed
1 tablespoon lemon juice
Salt to taste

1. Heat the oil over medium heat in a nonstick pan. Add onion and garlic and sauté until soft. Add curry powder and cook over low heat for about 1 minute.
2. Add tomato and chickpeas, stirring until mixed. Cover and simmer until tomatoes are soft, about 5 minutes.
3. Stir in lemon juice and season to taste with salt.

Serve with lemon juice and season to taste with salt.

Serve with pita bread or as a side dish. Makes 8 servings.

Nutrition Information Per Serving (without added salt and without pita):
132 calories, 5 grams protein, 23 grams carbohydrates, 3 grams fat, 5 grams fiber, 104 milligrams sodium, 65 micrograms folate, 0.6 milligram manganese, 66 micrograms molybdenum.

Research Roundup

• Eating lots of fruit and especially vegetables may significantly reduce your risk of kidney cancer. That's what a group of Italian researchers found when they looked at 767 people with kidney cancer and compared them to 1,534 people without that diagnosis. Those with the highest intakes of naturally occurring phytorusins called flavonoids, found mostly in fruits and vegetables, were 20% less likely to develop kidney cancer than those who had the lowest intakes.

Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention, January 2007.

• Selenium may prevent some of the mental decline that occurs with age. That's what French researchers are suggesting after a long-term study revealed that as blood levels of selenium drop over time in older people, mental function declines as well. The link was not apparent at a two-year follow-up of almost 1,400 people; it was found only after nine years. The researchers suggest that selenium's antioxidant capabilities may prevent oxidative stress to the brain, which scientists believe is responsible for some of the mental decline of aging.

Epidemiology, January 2007.

• Men who lose weight are at lower risk for an aggressive form of prostate cancer, compared to those whose weight increases or stays the same. Those were the findings of researchers who followed almost 70,000 men from 1992 to 2003 and tracked them for prostate cancer. The men who lost at least 11 pounds during the study were 42% less likely to develop advanced prostate cancer than the men whose weight stayed the same. Conversely, as weight increased over time, so did the risk of dying from prostate cancer.

Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention, January 2007.

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