

Cranberries: Antioxidant Benefits Behind the Tartness

The Folklore: We serve cranberries at Thanksgiving as part of a tradition that began at the first Thanksgiving dinner, when the Pilgrims reportedly served cranberries brought by Native Americans. The natives taught the colonists how to use the red fruit as a natural dye and about its medicinal value in treating arrow wounds, blood and intestinal ailments and preventing scurvy.

The Facts: One cup of whole cranberries provides 13 milligrams of vitamin C and four grams of fiber. More important are the abundant antioxidants in the form of phytonutrients. Anthocyanins give cranberries their brilliant red color and may play a role in preventing certain cancers and cardiovascular diseases. Proanthocyanidins, the most abundant antioxidant in the berry, are credited with cranberry's most celebrated health benefit—preventing urinary tract infections—but not by acidifying urine, as once thought. Researchers now think proanthocyanidins prevent bacteria like *E. coli* from adhering to the bladder wall and multiplying. Cranberries also provide quercetin, a phytonutrient that has shown anti-cancer promise in animal studies.

The Findings: In a landmark 1994 Harvard study, researchers found that women who drank cranberry juice cocktail daily (10 ounces of 27% cranberry juice) for six months were about half as likely to have bacteria in their urine—an indication of infection—as those who got a placebo beverage. Since then, several other studies have bolstered the findings, including a recent Finnish study.

Drinking cranberry juice may impart heart-health benefits as well. A preliminary animal study from the University of Wisconsin at LaCrosse suggests that cranberry juice may improve blood flow by inhibiting blood clotting and increasing blood vessel diameter. A second study that compared the level of antioxidants in 21 fruits ranked cranberries number one in polyphenols, the phytonutrients credited with the heart-health benefits of grapes.

The Finer Points: Because it's so tart, cranberry juice is almost always blended with other juices, like apple or

pear, or sweetened with high fructose corn syrup. Read labels and choose a brand with the most cranberry juice you can find. The entire *Northland* line contains 27%.

Cranberries are available fresh only from September to December. They can be stored in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. To enjoy year-round, freeze them in their original bag. They will retain their nutrients for up to nine months in the freezer. Frozen berries can be used in any recipe that calls for fresh berries. Thawing isn't even necessary; simply rinse and use.

For a switch, try dried cranberries as a snack or add them to baked goods, cereal or stir into yogurt. A little vitamin C is lost in processing, but the antioxidants remain mostly intact.

Ocean Spray is currently introducing three "white cranberry juice" drinks. White cranberries are the same berries, just harvested before they have completely ripened to their natural red. White cranberry juice is milder and less tart than red. A company spokesperson says white cranberries contain comparable amounts of proanthocyanidins, the antioxidant important for urinary tract health. But, we presume that anthocyanins, responsible for the red color and other health benefits, would not be comparable—a definite drawback. And the white drinks do not contain much cranberry juice—on a par with the amount in other blends.

Warm Cranberry Compote

2 cups cranberries, fresh or frozen
3 cups pineapple tidbits, fresh or canned
1 cup brown sugar
1 teaspoon cinnamon
¼ teaspoon nutmeg

1. Combine all ingredients in a saucepan.
2. Stir over medium heat just until the cranberries begin to pop.
3. Cool slightly and spoon into bowls. Top with yogurt or frozen yogurt, if desired.

Makes 6 servings.

Nutrition Information Per Serving (without yogurt):

Calories: 192 calories
Fat: 0 grams
Fiber: 2 grams
Vitamin C: 16 milligrams

Recipe courtesy of Produce for Better Health Foundation and Ocean Spray.

- **The risk of developing pancreatic cancer is greater for people who are overweight, but can be reduced with regular, moderate-intensity exercise**, according to Boston researchers. Of more than 160,000 middle-aged men and women, those classified as overweight or obese had a 72% greater risk of pancreatic cancer than those at ideal weight. However, of the obese volunteers, those who walked at least four hours a week had 54% less risk of pancreatic cancer than those who exercised less than 20 minutes weekly.

Journal of the American Medical Association, August 22/29, 2001.

- **Both green and black tea have equally potent antioxidant activity**, suggest researchers from China. In a laboratory study, researchers isolated and compared four black tea theaflavins with four green tea catechins—different but comparable antioxidant phytonutrients. The theaflavins in black tea were at least as potent as the catechins in green tea at preventing the oxidation of "bad" low-density lipoproteins (LDL's). (Oxidized LDL's are a key initiator of heart disease.)

Journal of Nutrition, September 2001.

- **Young women may need more vitamin C than the current Recommended Dietary Allowance** of 75 milligrams, a level derived from research in men, according to a recent National Institutes of Health study. The researchers recommend an increase to 90 milligrams daily, after studying 15 healthy young women on a metabolic ward for six months. They were given a baseline diet deficient in vitamin C, then various doses of C from 30 to 2,500 milligrams. There was a steep increase in the amount of C saturating body tissues with intakes up to the 100-milligram level, but little change once past 200.

Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, August 14, 2001.

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