Sweet Potatoes Glow with Health and Flavor

The Folklore. You can add the sweet potato (Ipomoea batatas) to the list of native American foods discovered by Columbus and his crew. This root vegetable called “batatas” by the natives was taken back to Spain around 1500, where it became an important food source. Cultivated in the U.S. as early as 1648, it culminated into a favorite food in Southern cuisine. In Colonial times, American doctors recommended sweet potatoes for children to help prevent childhood nutritional diseases.

The Facts. Sweet potatoes are part of the morning glory family, yet they are often confused with the yam, which comes from the African word “nyami” referring to the starchy root from a different genus of plants. Yams sold at the supermarket are actually sweet potatoes with a moist texture and orange flesh. Sweet potatoes are very high in vitamin A and C, B vitamins, manganese, potassium and dietary fiber. Because of their rich nutrition cache of protein, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals, sweet potatoes have been considered as an ideal crop for feeding the world’s hungry.

The Findings. The deep orange color of sweet potatoes is a calling card for its stash of antioxidants called carotenoids—the major one being beta-carotene, which can be turned into vitamin A in your body. Sweet potatoes also contain unique root storage proteins with antioxidant properties that protect the plant from disease, pests and stress. Epidemiological studies suggest that diets high in carotenoid-rich fruits and vegetables are linked with reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and some cancers, but beta-carotene supplements do not show the same benefits. Recently, Swedish researchers discovered that eating three or more servings a week of carotenoid-rich vegetables, such as green leafy vegetables or root vegetables, could reduce the risk of stomach cancer by between 35 and 57 percent.

The Finer Points. Look for firm sweet potatoes that show no signs of bruising. Store them in a dry, unrefrigerated bin, as refrigeration can alter texture and taste. Simply scrub sweet potatoes, trim off any woody portions, and bake, boil, roast or microwave them. The rich flavor of sweet potatoes pairs well with fruit flavors such as citrus and apricots and nuts like pecans and walnuts.

— Sharon Palmer, R.D.

Notable Nutrients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nutrient</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calories</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin A</td>
<td>38,433 IU</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vitamin C</td>
<td>33.2 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vitamin B6</td>
<td>6 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Potassium</td>
<td>950 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dietary Fiber</td>
<td>6.6 g</td>
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DV = Daily Value

Baked Sweet Potatoes with Orange-Raisin Sauce

8 small sweet potatoes
1 1/2 cups orange juice
1 8 ounce can pineapple chunks in unsweetened juice (reserving juice)
1/2 cup raisins
3 tablespoons packed brown sugar
2 tablespoons cornstarch
3 tablespoons water
Shredded coconut (optional)

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Wash, scrub and pierce sweet potatoes. Bake for 45 minutes.
2. Combine orange and reserved pineapple juice in a saucepan. Halve pineapple chunks and add to juices, along with raisins and brown sugar. Bring to a simmer.
3. Mix cornstarch with water and add to sauce. Stir until sauce thickens.
4. To serve, cut each sweet potato open, fluff with fork, and top with sauce. Top with coconut, if desired.

Serves 8

Nutritional Information per Serving:
232 calories, 56 grams carbohydrates, 3 grams protein, 1 gram fat, 21 milligrams sodium, 5 grams fiber, 26,788 International Units vitamin A

Recipe courtesy of North Carolina SweetPotato Commission

Research Roundup

- Metabolic conditions including obesity are risk factors in “swine flu” deaths. French researchers analyzed the characteristics of 574 deaths that occurred across the world associated with pandemic H1N1 influenza (previously referred to as “swine flu”) up to July 16, 2009. Underlying disease was found in at least half of the fatal cases. Two risk factors stood out: pregnancy and metabolic condition, including obesity.

Eurosurveillance, August 2009

- Vitamin D status linked with colorectal cancer survival. Cancer researchers analyzed data from the Nurse’s Healthy Study and Health Professionals Follow-Up Study, looking at the influence of vitamin D levels on mortality after study subjects were diagnosed with colorectal cancer. Higher predicted vitamin D levels after a diagnosis of colorectal cancer were associated with a significant reduction in mortality.

British Journal of Cancer, September 2009

- Green tea compounds may improve bone health. Three major green tea compounds—epigallocatechin, galloatechin, and galloycatechin gallate—were investigated for their effects on bone metabolism in a group of cultured bone-forming cells. In particular, epigallocatechin showed positive effects of boosting bone mineralization in cells and blocking activity that weakens bones.

Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry, August 2009

In Coming Issues

- Deconstructing Detox Diets. They’re everywhere, but is there any science behind detoxing your way to health?
- The Science behind Weight Loss. Have researchers finally cracked the puzzle of how people can best drop pounds?
- The Scoop on the Healthiest Whole Grain Cereals. EN looks beyond the labels to discover the best whole grain cereals.