

Berries and health

A succulent superfood

As a child, you may have been forced to eat your vegetables from time to time. However, even the pickiest eaters seldom need to be coerced into eating a bowl of strawberries or blueberries.

Strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and many other berries are among the most delicious foods available. Berries are also among the healthiest things you can eat. Incorporating berries into your diet frequently is a win-win in terms of enjoyment and nutrition.

It's all good

Berries are a diverse range of small fruits that lack large seeds and can be eaten whole without peeling or pitting. Some of the more common, commercially available berries include blackberries, blueberries, raspberries and strawberries. But there are many other types of berries, including acai berries, boysenberries, cloudberries, cranberries, currants, elderberries, gooseberries, lingonberries and wolfberries — also known as goji berries.

There isn't one best berry — they're all typically very nutritious. The latest exotic berry on the market may well be nutritious, but it's unlikely to provide health benefits that can't be achieved with more common berry varieties.

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Berries vary in nutrition, but they generally contain healthy levels of:

- **Fiber** — One cup of raspberries or blackberries contains around 8 grams (g) of fiber. One cup of blueberries or strawberries has around 3 g of fiber. For comparison, a packet of instant oatmeal contains 4 g of fiber.

A high-fiber diet can help improve cholesterol levels and lower blood sugar levels. Despite their sweet and tart taste, berries generally have a low

glycemic load. This means that they digest fairly slowly due to their fiber content, which keeps the bump in blood sugar — and the insulin response — modest after eating them.

- **Minerals and vitamins** — Berries provide an abundant array of vitamins, including vitamin A, the B vitamins, and vitamins C and K. They also provide an array of minerals, such as potassium, magnesium, calcium and iron.

- **Other bioactive compounds** — Berries are a rich source of a variety of beneficial plant chemicals called phytonutrients or polyphenols. These include tannins, lignans, and flavonoids such as resveratrol, quercetin and catechin. Among the most compelling berry phytonutrients in terms of health benefit are anthocyanins. These are the pigments that give berries and other plants their color, and are especially abundant in berries.

Studies have shown that berry antioxidants and phytonutrients — particu-

larly anthocyanins — have anti-cancer and anti-inflammatory effects, protect nerve cells and the brain, help fight infection and boost the immune system, as well as improve blood vessel function, cholesterol levels and blood pressure.

There's a very strong association between good health and reduced risk of disease and a diet that emphasizes a wide variety of minimally processed fruits, vegetables and other plant foods, including berries. However, studies that isolate the benefits of berry consumption in humans are sparse.

Still, studies have suggested that a few weekly servings of common anthocyanin-rich berries, such as strawberries and blueberries, may significantly reduce the risk of heart attacks and cardiovascular disease, delay by years the cognitive decline associated with aging, and reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Try the recipe below for a nutritious alternative to traditional coffee cake. □

Mixed berry whole-grain coffee cake

Fresh berries work as well as frozen, making this a delicious year-round treat. Serves 8.

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup skim milk
- 1 tablespoon vinegar
- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 egg
- 1/3 cup packed brown sugar
- 1 cup whole-wheat pastry flour
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup mixed berries, such as blueberries, raspberries and blackberries (do not thaw)
- 1/4 cup low-fat granola, slightly crushed

Directions

Heat oven to 350 F. Spray an 8-inch round cake pan with cooking spray and coat with flour.

In a large bowl, mix the milk, vinegar, oil, vanilla, egg and brown sugar until smooth. Stir in flour, baking soda, cinnamon and salt just until moistened.

Gently fold half the berries into the batter. Spoon into prepared pan. Sprinkle with remaining berries, top with the granola.

Bake 25 to 30 minutes or until golden brown and top springs back when touched in center. Cool in pan on cooling rack for 10 minutes. Serve warm.

Nutritional analysis per serving: Serving size, 1 slice; 144 calories; 4 g total fat (0.5 g saturated fat), trace trans fat, 1.5 g monounsaturated fat; 23 mg cholesterol; 139 mg sodium; 23 g total carbohydrates (3 g dietary fiber, 7 g sugars).