



# Festive cranberries offer health perks year-round

The color red elicits all types of symbolism. From extremely hot chili peppers to sweet, succulent strawberries, red foods add spice to please both taste and vision.

This time of the year, red conjures up images of Santa, candy canes and cranberries. But cranberry products are no longer just for the holidays. Although they don't provide many nutrients, cranberries are loaded with other beneficial food components known as phytochemicals. This makes them worth including in the diet year-round.

It's old news that cranberries decrease urinary-tract infections. It was assumed this benefit was due to their acidic nature, but recent research has uncovered compounds in cranberries that reduce the ability of unwanted micro-organisms to adhere to cells lining the urinary tract.

Ongoing research is exploring how this property also may affect bacteria in the mouth and the gastrointestinal tract. Some conditions normally treated with antibiotics might respond to cranberries, avoiding some of the negative side effects of antibiotics.

Also, the benefits of eating

cranberries may linger in the body. One study indicated that in women who drank a cranberry beverage daily for six months, the antimicrobial effect on the urinary tract remained after another six months without the drink.

Products that include the whole fruit are good sources of fiber, including pectin, which is thought to help lower blood cholesterol, providing cardiovascular benefits.

An additional six components of the fruit and juice are known to have antioxidant properties. Their names sound like things to avoid: proanthocyanidins, tocotrienols, quercetin, flavonoids, anthocyanins and phenolic acids. But these antioxidants protect the cardiovascular system by reducing the oxidation of LDL ("bad") cholesterol. Oxidized LDL increases the tendency of cholesterol to adhere to damaged portions of blood vessels.

These antioxidants also may have anticancer effects. Although only a few studies have looked at the relationship between cranberries and cancer, one study using mice showed that cranberry products both slowed tumor growth and decreased the spread of cancer to lungs and lymph systems.

If you have a tendency to form kidney stones, you may have been advised not to consume cranberry juice because of its oxalic acid content. The good news is that the oxalic acid is not high. New laboratory techniques indicate that the oxalic acid of cranberry juice is only one-tenth of prior estimates.

The scientific jury is still out on possible benefits of taking cranberry supplements. The phytochemical content of supplements can vary greatly.

For decades, nutritionists have promoted the consumption of fruits and vegetables on the basis of their nutrient composition. However, more and more, researchers are finding that the non-nutrient components of fruits and vegetables are as important.

Although it's trendy to say that you won't put anything into your mouth that you can't pronounce, we suggest you practice your phonics so you won't miss out on the health benefits offered by the phytochemicals in cranberries, during the holidays and beyond.

Can you say proanthocyanidin, tocotrienol, quercetin, anthocyanin, flavonol, flavonoid and phenolic acid?

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