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Pick a berry for health

by LYNN LITTLE

While most of us like fresh berries for their sweetness or tartness, nutritionists promote their potential power to help prevent cell damage.

(Photo credit: By The Associated Press /)

The pigments that give berries their intense colors also are the anthocyanins that give berries more antioxidant power than most fruits and vegetables. Anthocyanins have been implicated in decreasing the risk of cancer and heart disease by inhibiting tumor growth and decreasing blood clotting. They are rich in vitamin C and fiber, fair in potassium and folate and relatively low in calories. Blueberries also might help reduce the incidence of urinary tract infections.

Berry color is more important than berry size. As a rule, green and yellow berries are not ripe; instead choose deep red and purple berries.

Although best eaten soon after picking or purchasing, fresh berries will hold for a few days in the refrigerator. They'll keep longer if you wait to wash them until just before eating.

For longer storage, place unwashed dry berries in a single layer on a baking sheet and set in the freezer. Transfer the frozen berries to a plastic bag or container and use within a year; rinse berries gently before eating.

Cooking destroys much of the vitamin C and folate in berries but does not affect most anthocyanins or the fiber content.

For even more health benefits, visit a pick-your-own farm. Good health is all about squeezing in as many active moments as possible. Berry picking requires more movement than what you use by simply buying them at a market or grocery. Plus, it can be a fun family outing.

Here's how some favorite berries compare:

- 1 cup of blackberries contains 62 calories, 30 milligrams of vitamin C, 230 milligrams of potassium and 8 grams of fiber.
- 1 cup of blueberries contains 83 calories, 14 milligrams of vitamin C, 110 milligrams of potassium and 4 grams of fiber.
- 1 cup of raspberries contains 64 calories, 32 milligrams of vitamin C, 185 milligrams of potassium and 8 grams of fiber.
- 1 cup of strawberries contains 46 calories, 85 milligrams of vitamin C, 220 milligrams of potassium and 3 grams of fiber.

For more information on berries and other fruits, visit www.eatsmart.umd.edu and click on "cooking class." You can also visit www.mypyramid.gov and click on "tips and resources."

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