

nutritionally speaking

Maligned potato, full of surprises



by Dr. George E. Meinig

Dear Dr. Meinig: I love potatoes, but so many of my friends don't eat them because they are afraid they are fattening. Is this true? If you think they are okay what is the best way to eat them? O.L.

Dear O. L.: Potatoes have been a food staple for many of the world's people for centuries. The Irish are particularly large consumers, the peasants calling them "bog-apples."

In spite of this history, the potato is often maligned. Except for those allergic to them, pound for pound they pack one third fewer calories and more nutrients than the average refined grain products used in their place. A three-and-a-half ounce potato contains only 76 calories, while the same amount of cottage cheese, so often substituted, contains 106 calories.

Potatoes contain very little fat or sugar and are high in potassium, phosphorus, and calcium. They are 15% starch, one to two per cent protein, two to three per cent minerals, and 75% water. The higher the protein the more waxy in feel and appearance, while mealiness increases when the starch content is increased.

The very best way to eat potatoes is the one least often used...that is raw. Children throughout the ages have been snitching snacks of them raw, but mothers often stop them because of some imagined fear or prejudice. Uncooked they are a delightful addition to salads, to platters of hors d'oeuvres or for tasty between meals munching.

COOKING AND PREPARING reduce food value considerably. All enzymes are destroyed by heat, vitamin C is greatly reduced, and it is estimated that 25% of other vitamins are lost. That portion of the potato just under the skin contains twice the solids as the center portions, so it is not uncommon to find another 25% loss due to peeling. Cutting or sectioning in turn affects food value, and boiling causes many ingredients to be dissolved out into the water.

The best cooking method is baking with the skins. A good idea with larger potatoes is the insert of a stainless steel skewer to conduct temperature to the center, thus reducing the heat needed. As soon as the baked potato is removed from the oven, it should be pricked or broken open to allow the steam from its water content to escape, thus preventing the occurrence of sogginess.

I'm appalled at the large number of obviously overweight people I observe in restaurants who leave most of the baked potato but eat two or three rolls or slices of bread. These contain 300 to 400 calories compared to about 100 for the 'tater.' Too many also eat only one third of their salad but consume a 256 calorie piece of apple pie (a' la mode another 377).

Infants and children for the most part do better on potatoes than on the wheat or other grain cereals so often fed to them.

Potatoes to avoid are french fries and hash browns, as the fats and oils used in frying are highly damaging to our health and are double and triple the calorie count.

There is an enzyme in raw potatoes that prevents constipation. For those so troubled, try some during the day and as a before retiring snack. It can't do any harm, and you may be pleasantly surprised at the help you can receive from raw foods.

Dear Dr. Meinig: My daughter-in-law in Oakland finds your column very helpful! We have a delightful one year old boy and though she does not give him fruit juices, she gives him fresh fruit frequently. She would like to know [1] do raisins given several times a day tend to produce cavities? [2] how much daily fruit should a young child have? or what would you recommend? Thank you for helping us. O. W.

Dear O. W.: Yes, raisins will cause tooth decay and other problems of health because of their high sugar content. A cupful of grapes will contain 26 grams of carbohydrate (mostly sugar) while raisins, the dried grape, contain 124 grams.

If the child is in good health, has no allergies, skin problems, abnormal bowel movements, runny nose, etc. I would limit the fruit intake to one or two pieces a day but prefer the milder fruits such as banana, peaches, apricots, melons, etc., not the citrus varieties.

A cupful of most fruit runs between 15 to 25 grams of carbohydrate. When dried, canned, or frozen the sugar content is vastly increased, becoming two to three times as much. If the child has any symptoms or health problems, I would eliminate all fruit from the diet. That goes for older children and adults as well.

Your daughter-in-law is smart not to use fruit juices as much more is consumed than when eaten. Once the teeth erupt we are meant to chew our food, not drink it.

Instead of all that fruit let the infant chew on sticks of raw potatoes, carrots, celery or chicken bones. Fish, poultry, and the scrapings of lamb and beef, including liver along with their juices are gobbled up eagerly by most. Protein is no doubt the most essential food item. A child of one year should have one ounce a day, half of which is from animal sources. For cereal, steel cut, "regular" cook oatmeal is generally tolerated better than wheat. Hundred per cent whole grains should be used, if no allergies are present. If so, baked potato is an excellent dish for the infant and toddler and can be eaten morning, noon, and night.

Raw milk, cream and butter are most important. If your area doesn't have a reliable source, look for goat milk.

Supplements of cod liver oil for vitamins A and D and some vitamin C are recommended by the government and most authorities. Our ancestors spent almost all of their time out-of-doors. You will find if some of the child's time is spent outside in the sun every day, he will be a happier, healthier child.

Everyone has a question about nutrition. Send yours to: Dr. George E. Meinig, c/o OVN, Box 277, Ojai, CA 93023.