Potatoes: Yes, They Are Healthy!

Recent information regarding potatoes has resulted in confusion about what is healthy and what is not. Potato is a starchy vegetable and is one of the leading staple food crops of the world. Botanically, potato is a vegetable tuber and is included in the USDA’s Vegetable Food Group. It is often dubbed a starch and placed in the “starchy” food group, which is actually not a food group, but a subcategory that includes foods that are high in carbohydrate.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (2010 edition) recommends that half of your plate should consist of vegetables and fruits. Each vegetable and fruit contains different vitamins, minerals, and phytochemical make-up. Thus, the recommendation is to consume a variety of vegetables and fruit.

The potato is a vegetable and can be counted in the recommended servings of vegetables needed per day. They are often referred to as ‘white’ potatoes because the flesh is light-colored, as compared to ‘sweet’ potatoes, in which the flesh is orange. Though both vegetables are called ‘potatoes’, they actually come from different botanical families. There are over 100 varieties of potatoes.

The (white) potato, scientifically known as Solanum tuberosum L., is a member of the night shade family (Solanaceae), which also includes tomato (Solanum lycopersicum), eggplant (S. melongena), and chilli pepper (Capsicum annuum). The sweet potato, scientifically known as Ipomoea batatas, belongs to the Convolvulaceae plant family, which includes the morning glory.

Potatoes are a nutrient-dense food. A medium-size (~5.3 ounce) potato with skin contains ~110 calories, provides more potassium (620 g) than a banana, half of the daily value of vitamin C (45%), and contains no fat, sodium or cholesterol.

**Potassium**

The 2010 U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommends Americans increase their intake of potassium. The Adequate Intake (AI) is 4,700 mg/day, and it is estimated that as high as 98% of Americans do not consume enough or nearly that amount. Research suggests that a diet high in sodium and low in potassium may be one factor (of many) leading to high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.
**Vitamin C**

Vitamin C has many important functions. It acts as an anti-oxidant, which stabilizes free radicals, helps in wound healing, keeps gums healthy, and supports the body’s immune system.

**Fiber**

A medium-size potato contains 2 grams of fiber – contributing 8% of the daily value per serving. Fiber is important for digestive health and may help lower blood cholesterol.

**Other Nutrients**

A medium-size potato includes vitamin B6 (10%), which plays a role in metabolizing protein and carbohydrate, and iron (6%) – a major component of hemoglobin. Trace amounts of zinc, folate, magnesium, thiamine, phosphorus, and riboflavin are other nutrients found in potatoes.

The potato is a low-cost, nutrient-dense vegetable that can be included in a healthy diet, even for individuals who want to lose weight. Healthy eating is not about eliminating a certain food or food groups. Rather, it is a diet high in nutrient-dense foods, keeping portion size in check, and keeping potato toppings ‘light and lean’!

**Suggested baked potato toppings**

- **Fresh veggies:** raw or lightly steamed broccoli, onions, garlic, cauliflower, carrots, baby spinach, diced tomatoes, and cucumbers, or colored lettuce.

- **Beans:** black, great northern, chick peas, pintos, red beans, etc.
- **Dairy:** non-fat or low-fat yogurt, cottage cheese, sour cream, or hard cheese.

**Herbs and spices (fresh or dried):** dill, cumin, poultry seasoning, Italian seasoning, oregano, basil, parsley, paprika, onion powder, garlic powder, black, red or white pepper.

**References:**

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