

The Benefits of Berries

Red, Black & Blue are Berry Good for You!

-- By Leanne Beattie, Health & Fitness Writer

Isn't it wonderful when something that tastes so yummy is also good for you? That's what you get when you enjoy the delicious, sweet flavor of berries. The pigments that give berries their deep red, blue, black and purple hues are powerful, disease-fighting antioxidants. It is believed that antioxidant-rich foods offer protection against conditions such as heart disease and cancer.

The scientific community measures the antioxidant levels in foods using the ORAC (Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity) test. The higher the ORAC value, the more antioxidants a food provides.

Scientists have discovered that berries have some of the highest antioxidant levels of any fresh fruits. Raspberries, for example, contain an especially high level of antioxidants—three times more than kiwis and 10 times more than tomatoes.

The average serving of fresh or lightly cooked produce provides between 600 and 800 ORAC units. But berries blow these values away—one cup of blueberries has an ORAC value of 5486, followed by blackberries at 4654, strawberries with 3520, and raspberries at 2789. Scientists believe that eating between 2000 and 5000 ORAC units daily may increase the body's antioxidant supply high enough to result in positive health outcomes.

Raspberries

Slightly tart and juicy, the raspberry is a nutritional powerhouse in a tiny package. Raspberries are rich in ellagic acid (which provides the majority of the berry's antioxidants), and anthocyanins (which give raspberries their deep, red color and exhibit antimicrobial properties). As if their high antioxidant content wasn't enough, raspberries are also great sources of the vitamins and minerals riboflavin, niacin, folate, magnesium, potassium, copper, manganese and vitamin C.

Most cultivated varieties of raspberries are grown in California from June through October. Raspberries are highly perishable and should be purchased one or two days before using. Choose berries that are firm, plump and deep in color and avoid any that are mushy or moldy. Make sure that they are not packed too tightly in their container, since this may crush them. Because raspberries are so perishable, use care when storing them. Remove any spoiled or moldy berries before putting them in the refrigerator and then place the unwashed berries in their original container or spread them out on a plate lined with a paper towel. Avoid keeping raspberries out at room temperature or exposing them to sunlight for very long, they will spoil quickly in these conditions.

Raspberries can be enjoyed plain or mixed with yogurt for a healthy snack. Toss a few on top of your breakfast cereal or in your pancakes. Add them to salads for an unusual taste sensation. Top your raspberry-filled salad with balsamic vinegar to really bring out the flavor of the berries. Also check out these [raspberry recipes](#).

Blueberries

Blueberries are small and mighty, known for their anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties. They

also contain anthocyanin, the antioxidant that gives the berry its deep color and may also help improve learning and memory (according to studies on mice). Like most berries, blueberries are rich in disease-fighting antioxidants, as well as B vitamins, fiber and vitamins C, E and K.

North America is the world's leading blueberry producer, accounting for almost 90% of the world's production. Harvest time in North America begins mid-April in Florida, peaks in July, and runs through early October in British Columbia.

Look for fresh blueberries that are firm, dry plump and smooth. They should be deep purple-blue or blue-black in color (reddish-colored berries aren't ripe but may be used for cooking). Stay away from containers that are stained with juice, as this may be a sign that the berries are overripe, crushed or moldy. Fresh blueberries can be covered and stored in the refrigerator for up to ten days and washed just before using.

While blueberries can be eaten raw, they are often cooked in pies, pancakes and muffins. Add a few fresh blueberries to yogurt or cereal, cook them into a sweet syrup for topping ice cream, waffles or pancakes, or try a new [blueberry recipe](#).

Cranberries

Scientific research continues to prove the health benefits of the tart and tangy cranberry. Cranberries are sources of polyphenols, antioxidants that may benefit the cardiovascular system, immune system and act as anti-cancer agents. They also contain tannins, which have anti-clotting properties. Besides being a rich in antioxidants, cranberries also boast fiber, vitamins A and C, potassium and more.

Cranberry juices and sauces are available in the grocery store year-round, while fresh cranberries are in-season from September to December—just in time for festive holiday dishes. When purchasing them fresh, go for plump, firm (an indicator of quality) cranberries that are deep red in color. Before storing in the refrigerator, discard soft, discolored or shriveled berries. Frozen cranberries will keep for years, but used immediately once thawed.

Cranberries make a healthy addition to your diet, no matter how you enjoy them—as juice, sauce, fresh or dried. For the most nutrients and antioxidants, choose fresh or dried cranberries. Cranberry juice is very popular but look out for added sugars—buy 100% pure juice. Cranberry "drinks" or "cocktails" that contain added water, sugar and sweeteners contain the fewest antioxidants. Dried cranberries are a flavorful addition to salads and can be added to stuffing or baked into muffins. Fresh cranberries can be boiled into a tangy sauce or chutney and make a great addition to roasted pork or fowl. Discover a new way to prepare cranberries by using one of our [cranberry recipe ideas](#).

Blackberries

Plump, dark and juicy, blackberries are another delicious source of anthocyanin pigments and ellagic acids (both with healthy antioxidant properties), as well as vitamins C and E, fiber and the phytochemical lycopene, which protects eyesight. With anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties, a dose of blackberries may help fight minor infections too.

While the season for fresh blackberries runs from May to July, frozen blackberries can be found all year round. As with other types of berries, treat blackberries with care and wash just before eating. Add blackberries to fruit salad or bake with them as you would raspberries or other fruit. A fresh trifle of

layered cake, custard and berries makes a delicious summer dessert. These [recipes for blackberries](#) offer more unique ideas.

Strawberries

It's easy to see why strawberries are one of the most popular berries. Fragrant, sweet and juicy, strawberries taste as good as they are for you! This rich source of vitamin C, folate, fiber and B-vitamins also packs phytonutrients and antioxidants, such as phenols, which give strawberries heart-protecting, anti-inflammatory, and anti-cancer properties.

Strawberries reach their peak between April through July when they become widely available and most delicious. They are extremely perishable, so purchase them just a few days prior to use. Look for berries that are mold-free, firm, plump, deep red in color, and shiny—with their green "caps" attached. Avoid those with green or yellow patches, which indicate sourness and poor quality. Make sure that they are not packed too tightly in their container, as this may crush them. Before refrigerating, remove all moldy or damaged strawberries. Strawberries will keep fresh in the refrigerator for one or two days.

Strawberries are often enjoyed with desserts like pies, ice cream, shortcakes, and chocolate. Try plain strawberries, or add them to your morning cereal or yogurt, as a side to your pancakes, or mixed into fruit salad or fresh green salads. Protein-rich smoothies are another great option for strawberries. Expand your palate with a new [strawberry recipe](#).

No matter how you try 'em, berries are healthy foods that do wonders for your body.