

The Popcorn challenge

**Count the ways this whole grain can perk up a diet
Food for thought**

Craving a filling, tasty snack that smells delicious and is healthy for you, too? Try popcorn.

Popcorn is a complex carbohydrate that is naturally low in fat and calories. As a whole grain, it contains antioxidants, which may play a role protecting against cancer, heart disease and other diseases.

According to a recent study, popcorn contains higher levels of antioxidants than fruits and vegetables. The study was presented last month in San Diego at the national gathering of the American Chemical Society.

Popcorn should not be replacing fruits and vegetables in a healthy diet, however. Fruits and vegetables contain vitamins and other nutrients that popcorn does not have. Try to include a half or full cup of fruits and vegetables in every meal.

Still, popcorn is a perfect snack food. It has no sugar, fat or cholesterol. It is also an inexpensive way to add fiber to your diet as well as a little protein, and some iron.

Choose air-popped popcorn to get the most benefits from this whole-grain maize product, which originates from wild grass. Air-popped popcorn contains only 31 calories per cup compared to 55 calories per cup for oil-popped popcorn.

Remember that adding oil, butter and salt takes away the health benefits of popcorn by adding fat and even doubling calorie counts. Lightly buttered popcorn contains about 133 calories per cup. A tablespoon of oil or melted butter adds around 100 calories. One teaspoon of salt adds 2,400 milligrams of sodium.

If air-popped popcorn is too plain for your taste buds, get creative and add spices or herbs. Try chili powder, hot sauce, garlic powder, cinnamon, curry powder, dried dill, oregano or a teaspoon of grated Parmesan cheese. Spray your seasoned popcorn with a touch of water or healthy oil to help the spices and herbs stick. Soup with popcorn instead of crackers and salad with popcorn topping instead of croutons are other healthy options.

Popcorn is a good replacement for junk food because its flavor can be enhanced without adding too many calories. You can sprinkle popcorn with a little honey or maple syrup for a sweet treat or combine it with nuts and dried fruits for a fun snack mix.

As always, the key is moderation.

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