



berry berry good for you

Come summer, the produce aisle bursts with colorful blueberries, strawberries and raspberries. Those hues signal more than warm weather—they indicate an abundance of nutrients, especially antioxidants that scientists nationwide are researching for their many health benefits. Fresh or frozen, berries can fortify against disease by reducing inflammation and cell damage.

The latest studies on raspberries show that the seedy sweethearts are among the only foods packed with ellagic acid, a phytonutrient that shows promise in fighting several different kinds of cancers including lung, skin and colon cancer. Recent animal studies indicate that ellagic acid, contained mostly in the seeds, can slow down or prevent the growth of cancer cells and tumors.

Regain Youthful Vigor

If you think you can't turn back time, berries just might prove otherwise. Research led by James Joseph, PhD, of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Human Nutrition Research Center at Tufts University in Boston, has shown high antioxidant strawberry or blueberry extracts actually reversed aging in old rats. Researchers found that eating berry extract improved neuron function in both motor and cognitive skills.

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THE NUMBER OF CALORIES IN A HALF A CUP OF RASPBERRIES.

Oxidation and inflammation in the brain can damage neurons. But blueberries in particular can help reduce that damage because their various chemical compounds have strong antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Ron Mervis, PhD, of the Center for Aging and Brain Repair at the University of South Florida, College of Medicine in Tampa, Florida, who collaborated in a study with Joseph, says, "These benefits,

along with other indirect mechanisms, may help to minimize, or reverse, the age-related breakdown of communication between neurons and optimize brain function in the old rat."

The benefits gained weren't from eating truckloads of blueberries either. The animal's diet consisted of just two percent blueberry extract and the improvements were seen in a mere eight weeks. How much would you have to eat? Experts say about half a cup of blueberries daily. Easy to do by tossing some into a smoothie, baking them into a pie or adding berries to morning cereal.

Select and Store

Berries are delicate, so handle with care and don't wash before refrigerating or freezing. When ready to eat, wash them gently by swishing them around in water. Eat raspberries within a day or two of purchase. Strawberries and blueberries keep longer—but remove any mushy or fuzzy berries before storage. Berries also freeze well. Arrange them in a single layer on a cookie sheet and place in the freezer. When frozen, store them in an appropriate bag or container. They'll keep for up to a year. Frozen berries are as nutritious as fresh ones.

BLUEBERRY FRUIT LEATHER

Roll and wrap these up as a special treat for staff and clients.

4c fresh blueberries
1c fresh strawberries
¼c honey
1 tbsp almond extract

Place blueberries and strawberries in blender or food processor and process until smooth. Pour mixture through a strainer to remove skin and seeds. Stir in honey and almond extract.

Place mixture in a large skillet (10-inch is best). Cook over very low heat for 1 hour, stirring frequently, until thickened.

Prepare a cookie sheet by lining with parchment paper (paper is best but you could use foil instead). Preheat oven to 150°F.

Pour thickened mixture onto parchment paper and spread to form an 8 x 12-inch rectangle. Bake* for 5-1/2 to 6 hours until the fruit sheet is dry enough not to stick to your fingers but moist enough to roll.

Remove from oven and cool. Cut into 6 squares. Store leather in an airtight container or rolled in plastic wrap. **YIELD:** six 3 x 4-inch squares

**Placing a potholder in the oven door to keep it ajar will help dry the leather by allowing moisture to escape.*

SOURCE: Michigan Blueberry Growers Association, www.blueberries.com/Recipes/Desserts/Blueberry%20Fruit%20Leather.htm