

Avocado: A Fruit Unlike Any Other Fruit

The Folklore. Avocados date back to the mummies of Peru, which were discovered buried with avocado pits. The fruit flourished in Mexico and Central America, where the Aztecs called it *ahuacatl*, which means testicles, because of their resemblance hanging from a tree. A milky white liquid from the avocado seed turns a deep reddish-brown when exposed to air; Spanish conquistadors used it as ink to write documents.

The Facts. Botanically, the avocado is a single-seeded berry, but often considered a drupe. Avocados grow on towering trees that can produce up to 120 fruits per year. Mexico is the leading grower worldwide, while most domestic avocados come from California and Florida.

The Haas avocado, grown mostly in California and Mexico, is the best-known variety, named after Randolph Hass, who discovered and patented it in 1935. It has a dark purply-black, pebbly skin, with flesh that's soft, buttery and kitchen-appliance green in color.

In contrast, Florida avocados are much larger than Hass fruits, with smooth, glossy green skin. They have only half the fat content of Hass avocados, but not the same sweet, nutty flavor as the favored Hass.

The Findings. Although this uncommonly fatty fruit packs 29 grams of fat per avocado, most of it is heart-healthy monounsaturated fats. Avocados are also rich in fiber, potassium, folate and niacin plus they contain vitamins A and C and cholesterol-lowering phytosterols, as well as a healthy dose of lutein and zeaxanthin, thought to help protect eyes from macular degeneration.

The Finer Points. Avocados are available year-round. Choose fruit with firm, dark green or a pebbly purple exterior, depending on the variety. Shriveled or puckered skin indicates the fruit was picked too soon and may have an off taste or is past its prime and is overripe. Do not refrigerate.

Ripe avocados have tender flesh that can be mashed, cubed or sliced. But don't try cooking it; avocado becomes bitter when cooked due to its high tannin content. There's guacamole, of course, but mashed avocado makes a tasty spread all by itself, while sliced avocado lends a buttery soft contrast

to crisp vegetables in salads. In Brazil, avocado is mixed with sugar and enjoyed as a dessert or incorporated into ice cream and milkshakes. The most interesting culinary combination is a dessert in Java that mixes avocado with strong black coffee and sugar.

An underripe avocado can be coaxed along by placing it in a paper bag so its natural ethylene gas will help it ripen. Avocados turn dark quickly once cut; drizzling lemon or lime juice on freshly cut avocado not only prevents browning, but also adds flavor.

If you're allergic to latex, be aware that you may cross-react to avocado, which is related to the rubber plant.

—Catherine Golub, M.S., R.D.

Notable Nutrients (1 cup cubed avocado)

Vitamin B6: 0.4 milligrams (19% DV)
Folate: 122 micrograms (30% DV)
Vitamin C: 15 milligrams (25% DV)
Vitamin K: 31.5 micrograms (39% DV)
Potassium: 727 milligrams (21% DV)
Lutein & Zeaxanthin: 406 micrograms

DV = Daily Value

Avocado-Banana Spread

Instead of cream cheese, try this spread on bagels.

1 ripe avocado
1 ripe banana
1 teaspoon lemon juice
½ cup crushed pineapple in its own juice

1. Slice the avocado in half and remove the pit. Scoop out the flesh into a medium-sized bowl.
2. Peel banana and slice into coins. Add to avocado.
3. Sprinkle with lemon juice.
4. Add pineapple and mash together.

Makes 1 ½ cups of dip or spread for sandwiches.

Nutrition Information Per ¼-cup Serving:
84 calories, 11 grams carbohydrates,
5 grams fat, 3 grams fiber, 260 milligrams
potassium, 33 micrograms folate,
95 micrograms lutein/zeaxanthin.

- **Capsaicin, the compound that gives chili peppers their fire, may inhibit the growth of prostate cancer cells.** That's what laboratory and animal studies from the University of California at Los Angeles recently found. When researchers exposed prostate cancer cells to capsaicin, the cells self-destructed. And in mice getting capsaicin (the human equivalent of 400 milligrams three times a week), the growth of tumors slowed and the tumors were significantly smaller than in animals not getting capsaicin.

Cancer Research, March 15, 2006.

- **Insoluble fiber, such as in whole-grain breads and cereals, can improve insulin sensitivity.** That's the finding of a small German study that compared 17 overweight or obese women who ate bread enriched with 31 grams of fiber a day for three days to a similar group of nine women who ate white bread. The high-fiber bread group experienced an 8% improvement in insulin sensitivity, while the white bread group did not. The researchers suggest that adding fiber to the diet may be a safe, effective and low-cost way to reduce insulin resistance, which typically precedes type 2 diabetes.

Diabetes Care, April 2006.

- **Older people benefit the most when trained in aerobic exercise.** Researchers from the University of Washington in Seattle found that older people (aged 65 to 79) who exercised 35 to 40 minutes a day, on average, achieved proportionally greater gains in cardio-respiratory fitness than younger people (aged 20 to 33) who exercised the same amount. After training, the older participants showed a greater relative increase in exercise efficiency and were actually more efficient overall than their untrained younger counterparts.

Journal of the American College of Cardiology,
March 7, 2006.

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