

Pass the potatoes, or take a pass? Here's expert advice

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If you say "potato," and then say "healthy," some people might call your thinking half-baked.

At best, potatoes often are seen as a starchy vegetable that lacks the status of dietary rock stars like leafy greens or carrots. At worst, taters are the basis for all kinds of salty, fatty snacks—and a metaphor for mindless inactivity.

But couch varieties aside, potatoes have a place in a [healthy diet](#), nutrition experts say. Spoiler alert: Nobody will be offering a free pass to supersize your fries. But you can find other ways to enjoy them on your holiday table or year-round—particularly if you pay attention to preparation.

"The [potato](#) is not something to be feared," said Dr. Emily Johnston, a research assistant professor at the New York University Grossman School of Medicine. She studies diabetes prevention in [older adults](#) and has researched potatoes and their health effects.

The spud's modern connection to laziness ignores its history as a world conqueror. Although potatoes were domesticated in South America's Andes at least 5,000 years ago, they didn't cross the Atlantic until the 1500s. They nourished a hungry Europe, fueling a population boom that led to the Industrial Revolution.

Today, potatoes are the most-consumed vegetable in the U.S.—just ahead of the tomato, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The plain white potato's reputation as an [unhealthy food](#) also contrasts with some of the facts, Johnston said.

They are classified as a starchy vegetable, along with corn and yams. Starches are an "important component of the diet that is sometimes maligned," Johnston said. Potatoes are complex carbohydrates, so your body breaks them down slowly, providing long-lasting energy.

The [federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) recommend that adults eat the equivalent of at least 2 1/2 cups of vegetables a day and allow room for about 5 cups a week of starchy veggies.

According to the USDA, a [medium russet baked potato](#) has more calories than a cup of raw carrots, kale or corn. But at only 164 calories, it's still a relatively low-calorie food. It's also a good source of vitamin C, providing 16% of the recommended daily amount for an adult man and 19% for a woman.

A plain potato has neither fat, cholesterol nor sodium, Johnston said, "and we get some good nutrients."

Importantly, it also has lots of potassium (37% of what women need each day, 28% for men) and about 4 grams of fiber—nutrients that most Americans don't get enough of, Johnston said. Potassium is important for heart health, and fiber can help improve blood cholesterol levels.

So, what's the problem? "It's the fact that hardly anybody eats a plain potato," Johnston said.

Baked potatoes end up slathered in butter and/or sour cream and sprinkled with bacon—sources of extra calories and saturated fat, which the American Heart Association recommends limiting to about 13 grams a day.

About a third of the potatoes grown in the U.S. end up as frozen products—most of them french fries. A large order of fries from one popular fast-food chain has 480 calories, 23 grams of fat and 400 milligrams of sodium. (The ideal sodium limit per day for an adult, the AHA says, is 1,500 mg.)

People's tendency to pair potatoes with unhealthy foods has been

problematic for researchers, Johnston said, leading to conflicting conclusions over the years.

Her own research includes a [2020 study](#) at Penn State University published in the *British Journal of Nutrition*. It was a trial involving 50 [healthy adults](#) who each day for four weeks ate a side dish made of either steamed or baked potatoes with skin or a refined grain, such as pasta, rice, couscous or bread. Then they switched to the other side dish for four weeks.

In the end, cardiometabolic factors such as [blood sugar](#) or weight were no worse when participants ate the potato side compared to when they ate the refined grain side, and their fiber and potassium intake and overall diet quality was actually better when they ate potatoes.

Separately, an analysis of more than two dozen studies found a clear link between eating [french fries](#) and the risk of high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes. But the [findings](#), published in the *European Journal of Nutrition* in 2018, indicated that other types of preparation had only a "negligible influence" on the two conditions.

So, if you're in the mood for a potato dish, there's no need to call the whole thing off. But how you cook potatoes matters.

"Boiling leaches a lot of the nutrients out, so that's one of my least-preferred methods," Johnston said. She also suggests steering clear of potato flakes, which might take away nutrients while adding sodium, sugars or oils.

But baking, broiling and steaming work equally well, she said. However you prepare them, consider leaving the skin on: Although nutrients are found throughout the potato, she said, about half the fiber is in the skin.

Sweet potatoes and purple potatoes would add different nutrients, she said, but "there's not a huge difference among white varieties," she said. Fiber varies a bit, but "the most important variable is still the cooking method."

Johnston suggested flavoring them with herbs and spices like dill or oregano, or fresh chives. Instead of salt, try onion powder or garlic powder. Substitute plain reduced-fat yogurt for sour cream.

"I had some the other night that were roasted with a little bit of avocado oil and some rosemary," she said. Extra virgin olive oil is another heart-healthy choice for flavoring, she said, and compared with butter, it saves a lot of saturated fat.

For mashed potatoes, in place of heavy cream, try low-fat milk or unsweetened plant-based milk. Blending in cauliflower can increase the fiber content and lower the calories, Johnston said. Or just skip the mashed variety. "Maybe do roasted fingerling potatoes or something like that. The holiday table looks really nice with those different-colored potatoes."

The same goes for traditional latkes, a Hanukkah favorite. They're typically fried, but they can also be baked and even air-fried, Johnston said. "Some recipes include shredded carrots or zucchini to add some more fiber and water and decrease calories."

She acknowledges some people might miss a favorite holiday recipe, even if it does go beyond the bounds of ideal nutrition. So for special occasions, another option is to prepare them however you want. "Just make them how you like them and enjoy them, and try to eat them in a smaller portion."

Provided by American Heart Association

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