

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Any popcorn lovers out there should be overjoyed! You can count your popcorn as part of your healthy eating now, but read a little further before you head to the microwave. Dietitians for years have been promoting popcorn as a healthy snack, depending on how it is prepared. By itself, popcorn is a whole grain. It qualifies for the ChooseMyPlate.gov recommendation that at least half the grains we eat should be whole grains. It has the fiber of a whole grain. Because it expands so much when it pops, a serving is about three and a half cups. That's a lot more than a single slice of bread. And it takes longer to eat than a single slice of bread. So a single serving of popcorn can be more satisfying than bread.

But now, there's even more to celebrate about popcorn. Recent analysis of the 'other stuff' that travels with fiber has found that popcorn has a lot of antioxidants too. In fact, pound for pound or ounce for ounce, popcorn has more antioxidants than most fruits or vegetables. How's that for a healthy snack!

Part of the reason is that popcorn is so dry, only 4% water, while fruits and vegetables have a lot of water. As much as 90% of their weight is water. The water is good for us, it has no calories, but it does mean that we have to eat a lot of the fruit or veggie to get a lot of antioxidants.

Another reason popcorn can be a better choice is that we don't eat plain whole wheat flour. We rarely eat just plain brown rice. So the antioxidants in these other whole grains are diluted with lots of other ingredients. But when we eat popcorn, we

don't have to process, mix, beat or bake it. We can just pop and eat it.

The antioxidants in popcorn are polyphenols. These are a big group of compounds, but many of them help protect us from cancers. Some help lower blood pressure. Others help protect the brain from the effects of aging. Other foods that have antioxidants are nuts, chocolate and other whole grains. You know how many calories nuts and chocolate have, in just tiny amounts!

Of course, the trick is in how we prepare our popcorn. If you air-pop or dry-pop your popcorn, you're in great shape. Three and a half cups of air-popped popcorn, or one ounce, has just 108 calories. If you choose a reduced fat or fat free popcorn for the microwave, it will be about the same. But if you decide to go for the regular microwave version, oil and all, you're looking at closer to 200 calories for the same amount. Almost half the calories in regular microwave popcorn come from the added fat. Caramel and peanuts boost the calorie count even higher. As for those nuts, a single ounce of almonds, peanuts or walnuts has about 160 calories.

And please don't be fooled by the packages that promise only 40 calories a serving. Their serving is often just 1 cup, or less than half a tablespoon of dry popcorn.

Back to that fiber mentioned at the beginning - the polyphenols are with the fiber. That fiber is the husk. It's those little pieces of hard yellow skin that get stuck in our teeth. So don't complain too much about the husks. Not only are they fiber for our guts, they're also protecting our brains, hearts and other organs.

Air-pop your popcorn. Add a drizzle of oil, or better yet give the bowlful a couple of spritzes of butter-flavored pan spray. Sprinkle and toss quickly with your choice of seasoning, whether salt, Italian, taco or cinnamon sugar. For example, for a more

Mexican flavor, add 1 tsp of lime juice, ½ tsp chili powder and ¼ tsp salt to 4 cups of hot popcorn, toss well and enjoy.

Here's a different way to enjoy your popcorn, as a light and healthy dessert!

Apricot Cherry Popcorn Squares

10 cups air-popped popcorn	¾ cup dried cherries (or cranberries)
¾ cup sugar	½ cup + 2 Tbsp water
½ cup sugar-free apricot preserves	¼ cup light corn syrup
½ tsp lemon juice	

Combine popcorn and cherries in large bowl. Spray a 9x13 inch pan with cooking spray. Combine sugar, water, preserves, corn syrup and lemon juice in small saucepan. Bring to boil and cook with constant stirring until sugar dissolves. Cook until mixture makes thick ropy threads when dripped from a spoon. Drizzle over popcorn and mix well. Pack into prepared pan, pressing firmly. Allow to cool completely, then cut into squares. Serves 12. There are more recipes from the Popcorn Board at www.popcorn.org.