

PENNY SAVER NEWS

April 23, 2015

BY: Mary A. Keith, Ph.D., L.D.
Food, Nutrition and Health Agent

Have a Raisin

How long has it been since you had some raisins? Have a few more today. Not only are they sweet and delicious, they're good for you. Sugar sure, but they have fiber, minerals, phytonutrients (those antioxidant and cancer-protection chemicals) and prebiotics to help the good bacteria in your guts survive. And even the sugar is not as bad as many sweet snacks. With all the fiber, it's absorbed more slowly, so it doesn't raise our blood sugar as fast. Plus, they're really low in sodium. Finally, there are dozens of ways to use them.

Sweet! Yes, raisins are sweet because sugar from the grapes has been concentrated during the drying. Most raisins start as green grapes, the seedless variety. When they're ripe and fully sweet they are picked, then laid out on huge sheets of brown paper in the sun. The sun gradually removes the water. The heat and light turn some of the sugars to caramel, which is what turns the raisins dark.

Most of the sugar that grapes put into raisins is glucose and fructose. There is very little sucrose, the white table sugar kind. Because raisins are still whole fruit the sugar is tied up inside the fiber of the fruit. The fiber slows down how fast we can digest them, which means that our blood sugar goes up slowly over a longer time, instead of shooting up really quickly. In fact, a quarter cup of raisins has almost twice as much fiber as one apple.

The fiber and the slow rise in blood sugar are why raisins are considered such a good snack for athletes. There have been several studies comparing raisins to the gels or chews that endurance athletes use to keep their energy up when they're competing. Raisins did just as well as the more expensive energy boosters!

Plus, raisins come with a variety of minerals to help keep our blood pressure down and our nervous system happy. We all know that sodium makes many people's blood pressure go up. Raisins have practically no sodium. But potassium helps to keep it down and raisins are a good source of potassium. That little box of raisins has more than a whole orange. Along with potassium raisins give us copper and manganese. Both of these help keep our nervous system functioning well, and help keep the natural antioxidants we have working well. And they keep our immune system in

fighting condition to get rid of bacteria or viruses.

We used to think that the sticky sugar from raisins would be bad for our teeth, or our children's teeth. Because raisins don't have much sucrose they don't create as much acid in our mouths as most sweet snacks and drinks do. And even though they seem sticky when we eat them, they don't stick to our teeth. The saliva washes them off easily, cleaning the teeth. Now new research has found that not only are raisins not a problem, they might even help keep teeth healthier. Some of those phytonutrients seem to be especially effective at stopping the bacteria that cause cavities.

Many other kinds of dried fruits do have added sugar. Dried cranberries have a lot of added sugar because they are naturally so sour. But even other fruits such as blueberries and cherries are often sweetened. The sugar in raisins is what is naturally in grapes. It is not added. So your body does not have to handle all the extra sucrose or corn syrup. Good stuff!

Now that you're ready for some raisins, take your choice of sizes. You can buy raisins in the little 1.5 oz snack boxes, or 20 oz bags or tubs. A little box can be an energizing snack for the mid-afternoon slump at the office, or in your child's backpack for after school. Stick a baggie of raisins in your pocket when you go out to work in the yard or mow the lawn. Sprinkle some on your salad for dinner.

Here's a non-dessert way to use raisins, over fish! Use grouper, tilapia, halibut or other firm white fish. Served with salad or veggies and a side of rice, dinner's on!

Mediterranean Baked Fish

4 firm white fish fillets	1 pint carton cherry tomatoes
¼ cup black olives (Kalamatas are best)	½ cup golden or black raisins
¼ cup olive oil	1 lemon
1 Tbsp wine or cider vinegar	salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 400°F. Grate the zest of the lemon, then juice it. Combine tomatoes, oil, raisins, olives, vinegar, lemon juice and zest and vinegar in baking pan and roast until the tomatoes pop, about 20 minutes. Heat skillet, sear fillets on both sides until golden brown and they flake easily. Put the fish fillets on plates, divide the tomato and raisin mixture over them, season with salt and pepper, and serve. Serves 4.

Hillsborough County Extension is a cooperative service of Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners and the University of Florida.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Employment Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A. & M., University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating.