

**Healthy Bytes Initiative Article**

**June 2020 Cherries**



**Health Benefits of Cherries**

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It’s cherry season and a great time to enjoy this little fruit with a big healthy punch. Although there are over 500 varieties of cherries, there are two main types: sweet and tart. Sweet cherries (usually the Bing variety) come in a variety of colors from purple, to dark red and even pink and can have either dark red or white flesh. They’re easy to find late spring to mid-summer. Tart cherries are bright red and are usually harvested late July to August. Tart cherries, like their name implies, are usually used for cooking, like making pies or tarts, and for making juice. Tart cherry juice has been studied for its anti-inflammatory properties, although both varieties contain powerful antioxidants.

Cherries are a rich source of a variety of antioxidants like vitamin C and polyphenols, compounds responsible or the deep color of fruits and vegetables. Like other berries, they are high in anthocyanins and flavonol antioxidants. They also contain potassium, calcium, zinc, magnesium and fiber, all important for a healthy diet. Tart cherries are ranked #14 out of the top 50 highest antioxidant-containing foods.

Consumption of tart cherries, usually in the form of juice, is associated with reduced markers of inflammation. Controlled trials showed a drop in C-Reactive Protein (CRP) levels by 25% at 12 weeks. Studies have shown that 2 cups a day for 4 to 12 weeks can lower LDL cholesterol and triglycerides, reduce muscle soreness, decrease blood pressure, lower blood sugars and reduce the pain and inflammation of arthritis. Tart cherry juice may also improve sleep. And whole cherries or juice showed a 35% lower risk of gout attacks compared to those who did not consume cherries. The anti-inflammatory properties may help reduce risk factors for heart disease and diabetes.

When buying fresh cherries, look for a green stem. Intact stems help retain freshness. Cherries should be shiny and firm, although tart cherries are usually softer. Refrigerate in a closed container and place a paper towel in the bottom to reduce condensation. Cherries will keep well 4 to 7 days in the refrigerator. Wash well, just before using, since pesticides are often used on cherries. If freezing, rinse, dry and place on cookie sheet several hours in the freezer. Then transfer to bags or containers for freezer storage. You can pit cherries before or after you freeze them.

Tart cherry juice is not an accurate description since it is not really tart at all. It can be found commercially in jars at most grocery stores. Add fresh or sparkling water to ½ cup juice and sip throughout the day. Whip frozen or dried cherries into smoothies or add to morning oatmeal. Chop fresh or dried cherries into green or fruit salads, cooked veggie sides or muffin mix. Put fresh cherries on your summer grocery list or scout them out at local farmers’ markets.