

**Healthy Bytes Initiative Article**

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**Health Benefits of Jalapeños**

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If you prefer a little spice in your meals, consider jalapeños, which have been enjoyed for over 6,000 years. Originally grown in Mexico, the pepper is named for the city where it was cultivated. Jalapeños were used by the Aztecs and are a cuisine staple in Mexican dishes. Today these peppers are also grown in California and throughout the American Southwest. Texas has adopted the jalapeño as the state pepper.

Jalapeños are available in several varieties including Senoritas (very hot), Fresnos, Sierra Fuegos (mild) and Mucho Nachos. Chipotles are dried, smoked jalapeños.

Most jalapeños are deep green because they are picked at an immature stage and are usually about 2 to 3 inches long. These peppers can also be found in red and purple. Red jalapeños have a higher vitamin C content than the immature green. Some varieties have been hybridized to contain no “heat” for milder palates.

Jalapeños are a good source of vitamin C. Just one pepper provides 10% of the RDI. They also contain B6 which protects the immune system against bacteria and yeast infection, beta-carotene, folate and vitamin K. Jalapeños contain the mineral manganese which plays a role in metabolism, bone formation and the immune response. Manganese also works with vitamin K in blood clotting. Jalapeños also contain potassium, phosphorus, calcium and trace amounts of iron, zinc and selenium. Just one jalapeño pepper provides 2% of the RDI for fiber for a person consuming 2,000 calories per day.

Fresh jalapeños can be found in yellow, green and red varieties in most grocery stores, although green is the most popular. You can buy them fresh and whole in the produce section or canned, sliced, or pickled in the supermarket.

After harvest, fresh jalapeños have a shelf life of 3-5 weeks. Wash and refrigerate fresh peppers. Before using, it is recommended to dip in hot water 131°F for 4 minutes to kill off potential molds or pathogens. Use food-safe gloves to slice peppers and avoid touching eyes, mouth or other mucous membranes. Capsaicin, the compound that gives jalapeños their heat, is concentrated in the membrane surrounding the seeds. Remove seeds for a milder flavor. Soaking cut peppers in cold water also helps make them milder.

 Jalapeños can be used in a variety of ways in all kinds of dishes. Try them chopped for salads and salsas, veggie stir fry, soups, stews or chili. Slice raw peppers for sandwich or pizza topping. Hollow out and fill with cheese and served raw or grilled. Pickled jalapeños are tasty on top of nachos or tortilla chips. Fresh or canned jalapeños can be used in baked goods for extra zest. Jalapeños can also be used to make jelly, muddled into cocktails or added to breakfast smoothies.

However you choose to use jalapeños, they will add zest and health benefits to your menu items.