



Patient Information

Cranberries: Small Fruit, Big Health Benefit

Recent research shows that cranberries deserve more table time than the Thanksgiving season. The fruit is a plentiful source of phytonutrients, which are naturally derived plant compounds that can help optimize health.

For instance, cranberries contain proanthocyanidins (PACs). These compounds apparently help cranberries fight some of the bacteria associated with urinary tract infections (UTIs), gum disease and stomach ulcers.

The following amounts of cranberry products contain similar levels of PACs:

- 10 ounces of 27% cranberry juice cocktail
- 1 ½ cups of fresh or frozen cranberries
- 1 ounce of sweetened dried cranberries
- ½ cup of cranberry sauce

Urinary Tract Infections

Most notably, cranberries may prevent urinary tract infections. Research shows that the PACs in cranberries prevent bacteria from sticking to cells that line the urinary tract, which could cause infection. This is called an antiadhesion effect, and studies show that it can last up to 10 hours after drinking cranberry juice cocktail. For that reason, two servings of the drink throughout the day may be more beneficial than one. So far, research shows that cranberries can only help prevent UTIs, not treat them.

Dental Health

One study found that a component of cranberry juice, a high-molecular weight nondialysable material, could reverse and restrain the growth of some oral bacteria that are responsible for dental plaque and periodontal disease.

But some cranberry juice products are high in sugar and thus might not be suitable for reducing bacteria. Scientists are trying to determine a way to harness these beneficial effects in something with less sugar content. A study of a mouthwash that contains cranberry nondialysable material determined that it may reduce cavities by reducing the presence of cavity-causing bacteria.

Ulcers

Peptic ulcers, which are ulcers in an area of the gastrointestinal tract, are increasingly caused by bacteria called *Helicobacter pylori*. Preliminary research shows that cranberries may be able to prevent these bacteria from living in this part of the body.

Disease Prevention

Cranberries may contain more antioxidants than 19 other commonly eaten fruits. Antioxidants may protect cells against the effects of free radicals, which can damage cells and play a role in conditions such as heart disease and cancer.

Cranberries also contain flavonoids. These compounds have antioxidant effects that may reduce the risk of atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries. Cranberries continue to be studied as a natural defense against atherosclerosis.

Cranberries have not yet been tested in humans for cancer prevention. But one small animal study found that fewer tumors developed from human breast cancer cells when the animals' diets included cranberries.

Early studies suggest that eating fruits and vegetables with high oxygen radical absorbance capacity (ORAC) values protects against problems later in life, such as loss of coordination and memory. ORAC values are a way to measure overall antioxidant capacity, and cranberries have a high ORAC value.

A Few Cautions

If you have diabetes or glucose intolerance, keep in mind that some juices containing cranberry may be high in sugar. Sugar-free formulations are commonly available.

Eating cranberry products does not appear to cause any health problems, but drinking excessive amounts of cranberry juice could cause an upset stomach or diarrhea.

Finally, let your nurse practitioner know if you are consuming cranberry products on a regular basis for their health benefits, since they may interact unfavorably with some drugs, herbs or dietary supplements. ❖

Some information adapted from The Cranberry Institute (www.cranberryinstitute.org).

Additional Notes:
