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Potatoes: A Nutritious Staple for Every Celebration and Generation

Supporting Senior Nutrition with Potatoes During the Holidays

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Baked, boiled, scalloped, or mashed; smashed for pancakes, perogies, kugel, or latkes; or cooled to make Grandma's famous potato salad, potatoes have been a comforting staple in North American fare since the 18th century when Irish immigrants first introduced them in New Hampshire and sparked broader cultivation.¹ It's no wonder that potato dishes spark nostalgia during celebrations and family gatherings. But potatoes can be more than a comfort food for seniors this season. Thoughtful preparation can bring satisfying nutrition to the holiday table.

Nutrients of concern for seniors

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans call out specific nutrients of concern for seniors. Of course, nutrient needs vary by individual, but generally speaking, seniors are at risk for under consuming potassium, calcium, vitamin D, dietary fiber, protein, vitamin B12, and fluids for hydration.²

Potatoes and potato dishes can help boost consumption of several of these nutrients of concern along with other nutrients that support health and wellness for seniors.

One medium 5.3-ounce potato provides:

- **Potassium:** 620 mg, 15% DV (24% and 18% DRI for women and men 50+, respectively)
Potassium is necessary for healthy heart and kidney function, muscle contraction, and nerve

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¹ Sauer J. *Historical Geography of Crop Plants: A Select Roster*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press; 2017:320

² U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 2020-2025. 9th Edition. December 2020.

transmission. Inadequate intake can increase blood pressure and deplete the calcium in bones. Potassium is found primarily in the flesh of the potato. Removing the skin reduces potassium by ~150mg.

- **Dietary Fiber:** 2g, 7% DV (9% and 7% DRI for women and men 50+, respectively)
The fiber in potatoes, composed mostly of cellulose, enhances satiety and may contribute to a healthier gut microbiome and help reduce inflammation. In addition, fiber promotes bowel regularity, which can worsen with age, especially with a reduction in physical activity and/or fluid intake. Fiber is the only nutrient significantly reduced when a potato is peeled. A little less than 50% is found in the skin, so leave the peel on to optimize fiber.
- **High-Quality Protein:** 3g (7% and 5% DRI for women and men 50+, respectively)
Prioritizing adequate protein intake is a must to prevent muscle loss that happens naturally as part of the aging process (sarcopenia). Sarcopenia not only affects strength and functional physical performance, but is also associated with cognitive decline, accelerated progression of cardiovascular disease, increased risk of death, disability, and reduced quality of life.³ Of note, sarcopenia is also associated with cognitive decline.

While potatoes are not a rich source of protein, it's the biological value (BV) that might surprise you. Depending on variety, the BV comes in anywhere between 90 and 100 –approaching that of an egg – and is higher in biological value than protein from both soybeans (84) and beans (73).⁴ Potatoes offer more per serving than most other foods commonly consumed from the vegetables and legumes category.

- **Vitamin C:** 20mg, 30% DV (36% and 30% DRI for women and men 50+, respectively)
Vitamin C is essential for the synthesis of collagen, which provides structure and elasticity to connective tissues throughout the body. It also supports wound healing and immune function. Another important benefit of vitamin C is that it improves the bioavailability of iron found in plant foods. About ~4.5mg vitamin C is lost when potato skin is removed.
- **Iron:** 1.1mg, 6% DV (14% and 14% DRI for women and men 50+, respectively)
Though not a significant source of iron, potatoes' impressive vitamin C content and very low (to nonexistent) antinutrient levels make the bioavailability shine compared to that of many other plant foods rich in iron.⁶ Research suggests that inadequate iron intake later in life may lead to cognitive impairment.⁷
- **Vitamin B6:** 0.2mg, 10% DV (13% and 12% DRI for women and men 50+, respectively).

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³ Damluji AA, Alfaraidhy M, AlHajri N, et al. Sarcopenia and Cardiovascular Diseases. *Circulation*. 2023;147(20):1534-1553. doi:10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.123.064071

⁴ King JC, Slavin JL. White potatoes, human health, and dietary guidance. *Adv Nutr*. 2013;4(3):393S-401S. Published 2013 May 1. doi:10.3945/an.112.003525

⁵ McGill CR, Kurilich AC, Davignon J. The role of potatoes and potato components in cardiometabolic health: A review. *Ann Med*. 2013;45(7):467-73.

⁶ Beals, K.A. Potatoes, Nutrition and Health. *Am J Potato Res*. 2019;96:102–110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12230-018-09705-4>

⁷ Tardy AL, Pouteau E, Marquez D, Yilmaz C, Scholey A. Vitamins and Minerals for Energy, Fatigue and Cognition: A Narrative Review of the Biochemical and Clinical Evidence. *Nutrients*. 2020;12(1):228. Published 2020 Jan 16. doi:10.3390/nu12010228

This B vitamin plays an important role in immune function, protein and carbohydrate metabolism, and though more research is needed, may play a role in cognitive function in later years. Inadequate intake can lead to microcytic anemia and associated weakness and fatigue.⁸

- **Magnesium:** 46.7mg, 11% DV (15% and 11% DRI for women and men 50+, respectively)
Magnesium helps regulate blood pressure and blood glucose levels, along with muscle and nerve function. Research suggests that 5% of the magnesium in Americans' diets comes from potatoes.⁹
- **Phytonutrients:** Potatoes are rich in antioxidants. Beyond vitamin C, they offer polyphenols, anthocyanins, and flavanols in varying amounts depending on the variety. Many varieties are grown locally in Wisconsin, including red, blue and purple, white, yellow-gold, Russet and Fingerling.

Potatoes are already a nutritional powerhouse, providing a rich source of nutrients critical to preserving and promoting health and wellbeing. But the versatility of potato dishes allows them to go even further for seniors. Pairing potatoes with ingredients that provide complementary nutrients is a powerful way to nourish and satisfy.

Maximizing senior nutrition by choosing complementary ingredients:

- For a protein boost, top a baked potato with Greek yogurt. The yogurt packs a punch with three times the protein and half the calories of traditional sour cream.
- Add vitamin D to the mix:
 - Sauté mushrooms that have been exposed to UV light—look for it on the label! While vitamin D levels vary, one 1/2 cup serving of these mushrooms can provide up to 46% of the Daily Value in a single baked potato meal.
 - Turn your baked potato into a scramble. Two large eggs provide 11% Daily Value for vitamin D and 20% Daily Value for B12. (NOTE: Neither vitamin D nor B12 is found in egg whites, so be sure to include the yolks for this nutrient power-up!)
- For seniors watching sodium intake, unsalted butter greatly reduces sodium. A drizzle of olive oil has no sodium and is an opportunity to add monounsaturated fat. For a completely different experience, use a flavored olive oil that complements other toppings.

The holiday season can offer valuable opportunities to optimize nutrition for seniors. Serving nutrient-dense meals in social settings or during family gatherings can be especially important for seniors with low appetites, who may find it difficult to eat enough on their own. Festive potato meals – especially those that pack complementary nutrients – can help nourish and satisfy seniors during the holidays and beyond.

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⁸ Tardy AL, Pouteau E, Marquez D, Yilmaz C, Scholey A. Vitamins and Minerals for Energy, Fatigue and Cognition: A Narrative Review of the Biochemical and Clinical Evidence. *Nutrients*. 2020;12(1):228. Published 2020 Jan 16. doi:10.3390/nu12010228

⁹ Beals, K.A. Potatoes, Nutrition and Health. *Am J Potato Res*. 2019;96:102–110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12230-018-09705-4>

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