

Staying Cool As a Cucumber

Not everything we eat has to be packed with nutrients, long as it's not something ultra-processed. Which brings us to this month's feature: the cucumber.

It's about 96 percent water, so it's got hydrating properties in its favor. It's low in calories; a typical 10-inch garden cucumber, with peel, contains just 45 calories for the whole thing. Cucumbers are low in carbohydrates - 11 grams per cucumber, on average, which is helpful for those with diabetes.

One spot where cucumbers can do their best is stepping in at snack time, in place of something that might be a whole lot more unhealthy. They can fill you up and with a bit of luck and discipline, that bag of chips won't tempt you.

More About Cucumbers

(source: Tufts University)

Cucumbers belong to the same family as melons and squash. There are hundreds of varieties of different sizes, shapes, and colors, mainly classified as either slicing or pickling cucumbers.

While they are not among the top nutrition powerhouses, cucumbers are hydrating, filling, and add texture to foods. People who need to manage their vitamin K intake should be aware that cucumber skin contains a significant amount of this vitamin. One cup of sliced raw cucumber with the peel provides 20 percent of the recommended daily value of vitamin K. Peeled, this goes down to six percent.

With their refreshing crunch and mild flavor, cukes are tasty enough to be eaten on their own, but they pair well with many other ingredients. Use with (or in)

dips, or to add crunch to chicken, tuna, watermelon, or green salads.

Cucumbers are often used to make pickles and pickle relishes. These can be high in sodium and, in some cases, added sugars. A medium pickled cucumber (about four inches long) contains 785 milligrams (mg) of sodium: 34 percent of the recommended daily 2,300 mg maximum. When used moderately as a condiment, two pickle slices (170 mg sodium) or one-tablespoon of relish (120 mg of sodium) can add flavor without too much sodium. A tablespoon of sweet pickle relish contains five to eight grams of sugar.

Kinds of Cukes

Garden cucumber - This is the one we see at the grocery store most often, with dark green skin that's often waxed for better shelf life. You can wash away that coating when you get home from the grocery store with running water - and a vegetable brush, if you've got one. Diced cucumbers work well in chicken or tuna salad, in smoothies and gazpacho. There's a cucumber recipe on the back of this newsletter.

English, also known as greenhouse or burpless cucumbers - Often sold in plastic wrap, generally longer and slimmer than garden cucumbers, these work well as a substitute for chips, in green salads, or served in ice water.

Others - Persian (baby) cucumbers work well when diced in Greek tzatziki or Indian raita. There are round lemon yellow cucumbers, pale green "corrugated" cucumbers, and even brown cucumbers. You can use them as you would any other cucumber.

Pickle relish is okay, in moderation, due to potential issues with salt and/or sugar content.

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Recipe: Chinese Smashed Cucumbers With Sesame Oil and Garlic

(Serves 4-6)

Ingredients:

About 2 pounds thin-skinned cucumbers like English or Persian
(8 to 10 mini cucumbers, 4 medium-size or 2 large greenhouse)

1 teaspoon kosher salt, plus more for cucumbers
2 teaspoons granulated sugar, plus more for cucumbers
1 ½ tablespoons rice vinegar
2 teaspoons sesame oil
2 teaspoons soy sauce
1 tablespoon grapeseed or extra-virgin olive oil
2 large garlic cloves, minced or put through a press
Red pepper flakes, to taste
Small handful whole cilantro leaves, for garnish
2 teaspoons toasted white sesame seeds, for garnish (optional)

Directions:

Step 1

Rinse cucumbers and pat dry. Cut crosswise into pieces about 4 inches long. Cut each piece in half lengthwise.

Step 2

On a work surface, place a piece of cucumber (or several) cut side down. Lay the blade of a large knife flat on top of the cucumber and smash down lightly with your other hand. The skin will begin to crack, the flesh will break down and the seeds will separate. Repeat until the whole piece is smashed.
Break or slice diagonally into bite-size pieces, leaving the seeds behind.

Step 3

Place the cucumber pieces in a strainer and toss with a big pinch of salt and a big pinch of sugar. Place a plastic bag filled with ice on top of the cucumbers to serve as a weight and place the strainer over a bowl.
Let drain 15 to 30 minutes on the counter, or in the refrigerator until ready to serve, up to 4 hours.

Step 4

Make the dressing: In a small bowl, combine salt, sugar and rice vinegar.
Stir until salt and sugar are dissolved. Stir in sesame oil and soy sauce.

Step 5

When ready to serve, shake cucumbers well to drain off any remaining liquid and transfer to a serving bowl. Drizzle with grapeseed or olive oil and toss. Add half the dressing, half the garlic and the red pepper flakes to taste, and toss. Keep adding dressing until cucumbers are well coated but not drowned. Taste and add more pepper flakes and garlic if needed. Serve immediately, garnished with cilantro and sesame seeds.

Source: New York Times