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HEALTH

# 7 Surprising Things You Didn't Know About Pumpkins

The orange fruit of fall can help boost your immune system, protect your vision and even help you look younger



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By Barbara Brody, AARP

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For many people, fall is practically synonymous with [pumpkin spice](#) lattes, pumpkin bread and pumpkin pie. Although these treats are fine in moderation, they shouldn't be mainstays of your diet. The problem is hardly the pumpkin itself, but rather the oodles of sugar and fat that tend to accompany such seasonal favorites. "Pumpkin has an impressive nutrient profile," says Amy Kimberlain, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. "One cup of cooked pumpkin has 49 calories, virtually no fat, 2 grams of protein and 3 grams of fiber," and it's loaded with beta-carotene, an antioxidant that gets converted in your body into vitamin A.

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Here are seven facts about [pumpkins](#) that might surprise you, as well as tips for enjoying it in a healthier manner.



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## 1. It may help keep your immune system strong.

Steering clear of sick people, practicing good hand hygiene and staying up to date on your flu, COVID-19 and pneumonia vaccines are still crucial. But if you're looking to give your immune system a little extra boost this fall and winter, eating an ample variety of produce — including pumpkin and pumpkin seeds — may help, Kimberlain says.

Pumpkin packs a wallop of vitamins and minerals, including several that may help get you through cold and flu season relatively unscathed. Vitamin A, for instance, may strengthen the immune system and help fight infections, Kimberlain says. Pumpkin also contains vitamin C, which increases the production of white blood cells, helps immune cells work more effectively and makes wounds heal faster, she adds. And pumpkin seeds offer myriad nutrients that support the immune system, including zinc.

## 2. It may help keep your vision sharp.

In addition to beta-carotene, pumpkin provides lutein and zeaxanthin, powerful antioxidants that have been linked to better vision, says Lyssie Lakatos, a nutritionist, personal trainer and coauthor of *The Nutrition Twins' Veggie Cure*. "Lutein has been shown to [prevent macular degeneration](#), the leading cause of blindness in the U.S." (for those 65 and older, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), she says. "Studies also show that high levels of both lutein and zeaxanthin protect the eyes from harmful UV light."

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## 3. It's good for your heart.

Pumpkin is a good source of potassium, which helps moderate blood pressure by counteracting the impact of sodium, as well as fiber, which lowers blood cholesterol. It also contains arginine, an amino acid your body needs to make nitric oxide, "which is critical for blood vessel relaxation and blood pressure reduction," Lakatos says.

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Pumpkin contains an array of antioxidants that may prevent LDL cholesterol (the “lousy” kind) from a process called oxidation. “When LDL cholesterol particles oxidize, this can restrict our blood vessels, ultimately increasing our risk for heart disease,” Kimberlain explains.

#### 4. It may help you look younger.

No, you can’t eat pumpkin in lieu of wearing sunscreen, but the beta-carotene in it provides some protection against UV rays that contribute to wrinkles, sunspots and skin cancer. The vitamin C and E in pumpkin serve as potent antioxidants that reduce damage caused by free radicals and promote the production of collagen, which helps to keep skin youthful and supple, Lakatos says.

#### 5. Canned pumpkin and fresh pumpkin are similarly healthy – but read labels carefully.

Fresh is best, but canned is a pretty close second and is usually much more convenient. The key, Kimberlain says, is to make sure you buy the version with only one ingredient: pumpkin! She notes that grocery stores often keep 100 percent canned pumpkin right next to “canned pumpkin pie mix,” which might look similar at first glance but contains added sugars and other ingredients.



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Pure canned pumpkin can be added to smoothies, oatmeal, baked goods, pancakes and much more. Need just a small amount? Pour the remainder into small, freezer-safe containers (or into a silicone ice cube tray covered with a gallon-size zip-close bag), freeze it and defrost as needed.

#### 6. Pumpkin spice lattes contain little to no actual pumpkin.

Most of these frothy drinks are totally pumpkin-less, though some versions contain a smidgen. In either case, the biggest problem is that these are really indulgent desserts in disguise: A 16-ounce cup may have as much as 400 calories, 50 grams of sugar and nearly half the maximum amount of saturated fat you should get in an entire day. (If you can’t pass it up, ordering yours with skim milk, less syrup and no whip will blunt the damage.)

Pumpkin pie spice doesn’t contain any pumpkin either, but this spice blend (typically cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger and allspice) offers plenty of health benefits – provided you use it to add flavor to otherwise healthy foods. Cinnamon might help balance blood sugar, ginger may relieve minor stomach upset, and nutmeg offers B vitamins and minerals, Kimberlain

says. Try adding this seasoning to unsweetened applesauce, oatmeal or regular coffee or tea.

## 7. It's technically a fruit, but it works in both savory and sweet recipes.

Many people think of pumpkin as a vegetable, but treat it as a fruit by saving it for sweet drinks and desserts. Neither is quite right. By scientific definition, a fruit develops from the flower of a plant, while other parts are categorized as vegetables, so pumpkin fits the bill. And pumpkin itself isn't inherently sweet; it's all about what you pair with it. "Pumpkin is very versatile," says Kimberlain, who likes to use it in risottos and chilies or simply roast it and serve as a side dish.

Lakatos is a fan of pumpkin seed butter, an earthy green paste you can buy premade or make yourself (by pureeing pumpkin seeds with a small amount of sea salt). "I often recommend it to vegetarians, because it's a good deal higher in protein than most nut butters," she says. (It has about 9 grams per serving.) When you're craving something with a little sweetness but don't want to go overboard, try Lakatos twins' recipe for Pumpkin Pie Oat Breakfast Muffins. It incorporates canned pumpkin and pumpkin seeds and has a reasonable 8 grams of sugar per muffin. (A typical blueberry muffin, in contrast, can have as much as 35 grams.)

### PUMPKIN TRIVIA

- Pumpkins come in a wide range of sizes, some weighing more than 1,000 pounds. The heaviest pumpkin ever harvested weighed more than 2,700 pounds and was grown in Chianti, Italy.
- The biggest pumpkin pie ever made weighed in at a whopping 3,699 pounds. It was created by the New Bremen Giant Pumpkin Growers and presented at the New Bremen Pumpkinfest in Ohio in 2010.
- There are more than 100 varieties of pumpkins, including the miniature Sweetie Pie and the supersize Atlantic Giant.
- 85 percent of the canned pumpkin distributed worldwide is packed at the Nestlé/Libby's factory in Morton, Illinois, a.k.a. the Pumpkin Capital of the World.
- Pumpkins are 90 percent water.
- A blend of cinnamon, ginger and nutmeg was included in a recipe for pumpkin (and squash) pie in the *Fannie Farmer 1896 Cook Book: The Boston Cooking School*. [McCormick & Co.](#) introduced the Pumpkin Pie spice blend of cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and allspice in 1934.
- Americans spend an estimated half-billion dollars on pumpkin spice products every year, according to Nielsen data.



**Pumpkin pie oat breakfast muffins.**

COURTESY THE NUTRITION TWINS, TAMMY AND LYSSIE LAKATOS

### PUMPKIN PIE OAT BREAKFAST MUFFINS

**Ingredients**

- 2 cups old fashioned oats or rolled oats (not instant)
- 1 tsp. baking powder 1/4 tsp. salt 1 Tbsp. pumpkin pie spice
- 1/4 tsp. vanilla extract 1 cup almond milk (we used unsweetened vanilla)
- 3/4 cup canned pure pumpkin
- 1 egg
- 1/4 cup honey
- 1/4 cup dried cranberries (if you'd like muffins a little sweeter, we suggest adding an additional 1/4 cup)
- 3 Tbsp. raw pumpkin seeds
- 1 Tbsp. seed and grain blend (we used Trader Joe's Super Seed & Ancient Grain blend; you can use whatever type of seed or grain you have on hand!)

**Directions**

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Line a 12-cup cupcake pan with muffin papers or coat with nonstick spray.
3. Combine all ingredients and mix completely until thoroughly combined in a bowl.
4. Divide batter into 12 cups so it's evenly distributed.
5. Bake for 18 to 22 minutes.

When done, the tops will be firm and not goeey or moist. Poke with a toothpick — and when it comes out clean, the muffins are ready! Be careful not to overbake.

Nutrition Facts Per Serving: 105 calories, 2g fat, 0g saturated fat, 16mg cholesterol, 75mg sodium, 20g carbohydrate, 2g fiber, 8g sugar, 3g protein

Source: [Nutrition Twins](#)

*Barbara Brody is a New York-based freelance writer who specializes in health and wellness. Her work has appeared in many outlets, including WebMD, Health and Prevention.*

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