

PRINT-Harvesting the health benefits of pumpkins beyond Thanksgiving

Many bountiful Thanksgiving feasts will include the traditional pumpkin pie and it seems with each passing fall, the spice that comes from the orange gourd becomes even more popular.

This year, the list has grown to include pumpkin-spiced hummus, Pringles, and Twinkies; even instant pumpkin spice latte for dogs!

If you can't find your favorite food already laced with pumpkin spice, there is spray-on pumpkin oil. And, for people who really want to be healthy, there's pumpkin flavored kale chips and kombucha.

OSF HealthCare Dietician Kaela Ketcham says be careful because pumpkin flavor is often added to sugary products.

"You do want to be cautious about what pumpkin spice products you are buying because one, they may not contain any pumpkin at all and two they might just contain a lot of sugar."

Ketcham says pumpkin is a highly nutrient-dense food. It is rich in vitamins and minerals but low in calories. Also, pumpkins seeds can be a good protein snack because they are high in fiber and make you feel full longer, so they suppress hunger pangs.

The seeds also contain serotonin which can help promote better sleep and their monounsaturated fatty acids help lower bad cholesterol and increase good cholesterol in the blood.

You can find pumpkin infused protein powder, especially in nutrition stores. But, Ketcham says it's better to go with the real thing.

She suggests, "If you're making a smoothie, you can always add always add a little bit, two tablespoon or so of pureed pumpkin. Even if you're making pumpkin spice lattes at home, you can even add a couple of tablespoons of real pumpkin to get that depth of the pumpkin flavor to have it a little bit healthier, not as much sugar and actually get more pumpkin than what they use in a store."

You might be surprised to know pumpkin is a fruit and contains 94 percent water. That is what makes it low in calories. Ketcham adds it's also great for a body's immune system because it's high in beta-carotene which your body turns into Vitamin A which boosts your ability to fight infections.

Because of all of its great nutritional qualities, Ketcham suggests talking to your grocer's produce manager about stocking edible pumpkins or look for canned, no sugar-added pumpkin puree and find ways you can incorporate the orange gourd into your diet all year long.

Ketcham recommends, "You can also incorporate it in your oatmeal. You can put it in soups and stews and chilies. I saw a recipe for pasta shells. You stuff pasta shells with pumpkin and

cheeses. You really get the benefit of pumpkin all year round without having to put it in a baked good and then putting all that sugar on top of it.”

Fun fact about pumpkins, 85% of the processed pumpkin in the United States comes from Libby's plant in Morton, Illinois.

Here is a healthy recipe for Savory Pumpkin Ravioli from Explore Health

- 1 cup canned pumpkin
- 1/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon black pepper
- 24 wonton wrappers
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup chicken broth
- 1 1/2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- Chopped parsley

Combine 1 cup pumpkin, 1/3 cup Parmesan, 1/4 teaspoon salt, and 1/8 teaspoon black pepper.

Spoon about 2 teaspoons pumpkin mixture into center of each wonton wrapper.

Moisten edges of dough with water; bring 2 opposite sides together to form a triangle, pinching edges to seal.

Place ravioli into a large saucepan of boiling water with 1 teaspoon salt.

Cook 7 minutes, and drain in a colander.

Place 1/2 cup broth and 1 1/2 tablespoons butter in pan; bring to a boil

Add ravioli, tossing to coat. Sprinkle with parsley.

*This recipe has less than 200 calories per serving