

WELLNESS > NUTRITION

# Health Benefits of Prickly Pear

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Prickly pear (*Opuntia* spp.), also known as cactus pear or barbary fig, is a perennial plant native to Mexico that grows in many areas around the world, such as the Mediterranean region. <sup>[1]</sup>

The fruit of the prickly pear plant is oval-shaped and typically grows between two and five inches in length. When ripe, the pulp has a sweet taste that's often described as melon- or berry-like. The skin and pulp of prickly pear fruit vary in color depending on the species. Some common colors of prickly pear fruit include white, yellow, purple, red, green, and brown. <sup>[2]</sup>

The fruit of some types of prickly pear plants can be enjoyed fresh or made into other food products, like juices and jams. Prickly pears are highly nutritious and provide a variety of vitamins and minerals, plus powerful plant compounds with [antioxidant](#) and anti-inflammatory properties.

Though various parts of the prickly pear plant, including the stems, are edible, most research focuses on the potential health benefits related to eating prickly pear fruit.

## Has Anti-Inflammatory and Antioxidant Effects

Prickly pears contain vitamins, antioxidants, and plant pigments like carotenoids and betalains that all may help reduce inflammation in the body.

Some research suggests consuming prickly pear may help reduce certain [inflammatory markers](#).

A small study of 28 people found consuming 200 grams of prickly pear fruit pulp twice a day for two weeks resulted in greater decreases in

In the same study, the prickly pear diet increased the participant's skin carotenoid content, which is a marker of the body's antioxidant status. [3]

The anti-inflammatory effects of prickly pears may also benefit people with inflammation-related pain.

A study that included 40 people experiencing joint pain found people who drank three ounces of prickly pear juice daily for eight weeks had better range of motion, relied less on pain medication, and experienced lower pain levels compared to a placebo group. The prickly pear group also had greater reductions in inflammatory markers. [4]

## May Benefit Heart Health

Consuming prickly pear may help reduce heart disease risk factors, improve the heart's response to exercise, and reduce the stress of intensive exercise on the heart.

A recent review of research found the consumption of prickly pear fruit was associated with reductions in [LDL cholesterol](#) and total cholesterol levels. [5]

A small study with 22 male athletes found the men who consumed five ounces of prickly pear juice per day for two weeks had significant reductions in total cholesterol, triglycerides, LDL cholesterol, and maximal heart rate before and immediately after a physical fitness test compared to a control group. [6]

In the same study, the prickly pear group also experienced significant reductions in malondialdehyde (MDA), which is a marker of oxidative stress that typically increases after intense exercise. [6]

Prickly pear is a good source of several vitamins and minerals that are commonly under-consumed in the United States.

For example, a one-cup serving of prickly pear fruit covers 7% of your daily needs for [potassium](#), a mineral most Americans don't get enough of.

<sup>[7]</sup><sup>[8]</sup> Research suggests fewer than 3% of Americans exceed the Daily Value (DV) for potassium, which is set at 4,700 mg per day. <sup>[9]</sup>

Potassium is necessary for [blood pressure regulation](#), muscle contraction, and many other critical functions in the body. <sup>[8]</sup>

Prickly pear is also a concentrated source of [vitamin C](#) and [magnesium](#), which play important roles in maintaining the health of the immune and nervous systems, skin, heart, and more. Both of these nutrients are low in many people's diets, especially older adults. <sup>[10]</sup><sup>[11]</sup>

## Nutrition of Prickly Pear

Prickly pears provide a number of nutrients, including fiber, vitamin C, and magnesium.

A one-cup serving of raw prickly pear fruit contains: <sup>[7]</sup>

- **Calories:** 61
- **Carbs:** 14.3 grams (g)
- **Fiber:** 5.4 g
- **Protein:** 1.1 g
- **Fat:** 0.76 g
- **Vitamin C:** 20.9 milligrams (mg) or 23% of the DV

- **Potassium:** 328 mg or 7% of the DV

Prickly pear is rich in vitamin C, magnesium, and copper and provides a decent source of potassium. The fruit also contains smaller amounts of other nutrients, such as calcium and several B vitamins.

Prickly pear is a particularly concentrated source of magnesium, a mineral involved in a number of important processes in the body, such as blood pressure regulation and stress response. If your diet is low in magnesium, it could impact your health in several ways, such as increasing the risk of conditions like [heart disease](#) and [anxiety](#).<sup>[12][13]</sup>

The fruit is also a good source of fiber, which is important for digestive health, as well as a number of protective plant compounds, such as polyphenols, flavonoids, and betalains. These substances have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties and may help protect against cellular damage and reduce inflammatory markers.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Risks of Prickly Pear

Prickly pear fruits are safe to consume for most people. It's important to peel the fruits before eating. Some prickly pear fruits are covered with spines, which are unsafe to consume.<sup>[2]</sup>

Very rarely, there have been reports of fecal impaction (long-term constipation caused by poop stuck in your rectum) caused by consuming too many prickly pear seeds. While this potential risk is rare, you should seek medical care if you experience severe constipation after a large consumption of prickly pear seeds.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Tips for Consuming Prickly Pear

juices. When eating fresh prickly pear, you can either swallow the seeds whole or spit them out.

Here are a few tips for consuming prickly pear:

- Use frozen prickly pears in [smoothies](#) for a unique flavor and boost of nutrition
- Enjoy peeled prickly pears raw as a snack
- Make a jam out of fresh or frozen prickly pears
- Extract the juice from fresh prickly pears using a juicer or blender
- Use prickly pear juice in marinades and salad dressings
- Add prickly pear puree or juice to baked goods, like muffins and cakes
- Sprinkle chopped prickly pear over salads for a naturally sweet and unique topping
- Add fresh prickly pear or prickly pear puree to yogurt parfaits and [oatmeal](#)

## A Quick Review

Prickly pears are flavorful fruits that are packed with nutrients, including vitamin C, magnesium, potassium, and fiber. They also provide protective plant compounds, such as betalains, that have anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects in the body.

Adding prickly pears to your diet may help boost heart health, improve your body's antioxidant status, and reduce inflammatory markers. Prickly pears are delicious raw and cooked and can be made into juices, purees, and jams.


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 A bowl of peas placed on top of a dishcloth on top of a wooden

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 Acai bowl with acai berries and granola on top. A spoon on the side

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pears with water drops

A collection of different fall vegetables.

A bunch of watercress on a wooden table

Apricots in a bowl

View from the top of a bowl of ripe strawberries

Cereals, grains and flour, Buckwheat, Quinoa.

Woman wearing a blue sweater is drinking a glass of milk in her



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honeydew melon on a wooden cutting board

Colorful bottle of freshly squeezed orange juice with fresh

Organic Yuzu (Japanese citrus lemon) displayed in a traditional

cruciferous vegetables: cauliflower, broccoli, Brussels

A variety of high protein vegetables.

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