

Asparagus: Spears of Health

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Asparagus is a spring vegetable once categorized as a lily but now is a member of the cruciferous family (cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, etc). In ancient times, it was used as medicine and has been pictured in Egyptian art dating back to 3000 BC. In early France, asparagus was called *points d'amour* or "love tips" because the most delicate taste is in the tips. Not just delicious, asparagus is rich in healthy nutrients.



Asparagus is a great source of antioxidants like vitamins A and C and the mineral, selenium, which all help to reduce inflammation like that associated with inflammatory diseases and arthritis. It is high in multiple B vitamins like thiamine, riboflavin and niacin. It is especially rich in the B vitamin, folate, which is an essential nutrient during periods of rapid growth like pregnancy, infancy and adolescence. Folate has also been shown to be protective against heart disease, stroke and some cancers. Vitamins B6 and pantothenic acid help to lower blood pressure and homocysteine, reducing risk for heart disease. Because it is rich in potassium, asparagus also helps to lower blood pressure. Vitamin K and calcium protect bone health and the iron in asparagus helps deliver oxygen to muscles. Asparagus also contains chromium, a mineral known to transport glucose from the blood into cells to make energy.

High in protective nutrients, asparagus is also low in calories and high in dietary fiber. High fiber diets are associated with low risk for heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer and high blood pressure. Not only can fiber lower cholesterol and improve insulin sensitivity, it increases feelings of fullness which helps with weight management.

When shopping for asparagus, you can find three varieties: white, green and purple. The white is grown away from sunlight and is missing the chlorophyll that creates the green color. The green is the most common and rich in antioxidants. The purple contains extra compounds that create the purple color, but is lower in fiber. When buying or picking asparagus, choose dry, tight stalks, not soft or wilted. Thin asparagus is young and can be eaten in its entirety. Thicker stalks are older and the bottoms of the stalks can become tough and fibrous. When preparing thicker stalks, add gentle pressure to the end of the stalk. It will easily break where the woodiness ends. Or peel woody layer off the bottom and retain the length of the stalk. Store fresh asparagus standing in a glass of water in the refrigerator.

Before cooking, wash thoroughly, since the spears can hold onto the soil in which it was grown. Eat raw or steam, broil or roast. Boiling in water is not recommended since vitamins are lost in the water. Try growing your own. Once planted, it comes back annually in the spring.