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Dragon Fruit – amazing fruit with numerous health benefits

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Dragon fruit grows on the *Hylocereus* cactus, also known as the Honolulu queen. The cactus plant is native to southern Mexico and Central America but these days it is grown all over the world. The name Dragon fruit has originated because of the bright pink colour of the fruit having distinct scaly outer look. It is a tropical fruit belonging to the cactus family and has gained popularity in recent years. It is also known as *pitaya*, *pitahaya*, and strawberry pear, dragon pearl fruit dragon scales, dragon crystal or green dragon throughout Asia. Beneath the scaly outer pink skin, is a sweet white or red flesh specked (embedded) with black seeds. There is another variety referred to as yellow dragon fruit which is marked with yellow skin and white pulp with black seeds.

Dragon fruit looks exotic, but its flavor and taste has been described as a slightly sweet cross between a kiwi and a pear. The fruit is extremely refreshing and the best way to consume is to peel the scaly outer skin and then slice/scoop the inner flesh and consume it without any alteration. It can be used to shake up mocktails and other beverages as it tends to blend well with other flavours. Known as *pitaya* in Hindi, it is a powerhouse of nutrition and is packed with many health benefiting properties (low in calories, zero cholesterol and full of antioxidants).

Nutritional value of Dragon fruit (per 100 gram fruit)

- **Calories:** 60
- **Protein:** 1.2 grams
- **Fat:** 0 grams
- **Carbs:** 13 grams
- **Fiber:** 3 grams
- **Vitamin C:** 3% of the RDI
- **Iron:** 4% of the RDI
- **Magnesium:** 10% of the RDI

HEALTH BENEFITS OF DRAGON FRUIT

Rich source of Vitamin C : dragon fruit is a good source of vitamin C thus it helps in strengthening/boosting immunity, helps in aiding the absorption of iron by the body, makes our teeth healthier by producing collagen and promoting a healthy and glowing skin.

High in fiber content : Dragon fruit is a good source of dietary fiber, therefore it is not only great for the heart, but also helps in maintaining blood pressure and weight. Increased consumption of dragon fruit can lower risk of both cardiovascular disease (CVD) and coronary heart disease (CHD).

Low level of cholesterol : the fruit is extremely low in cholesterol, as well as saturated and trans fats. Regular consumption of the fruit is not only refreshing but also help in maintaining a healthy heart in long run. The seeds present in the fruit are loaded with omega 3 fatty acids and play a vital role in health and well-being.

Healthy for Heart : the fruit is considered to be loaded with fiber and antioxidants and these two contribute in keeping the heart healthy and young. They fight against plaque clogging up in the arteries and hence maintaining the blood circulation in the body.

Rich in antioxidant : Vibrant colour indicates that the dragon fruit is filled with phytonutrients that can provide required dose of antioxidants. These are compounds that protect cells from unstable molecules called free radicals, which are linked to chronic diseases and aging and even cancer. Some of the main antioxidants contained in dragon fruit pulp are as follows:

- **Betalains :** Found in the pulp of red dragon fruit, these deep red pigments have been shown to protect “bad” LDL cholesterol from becoming oxidized or damaged.
- **Hydroxycinnamates:** These groups of antioxidants have potent anticancer activity.

- **Flavonoids** : these are linked to better brain health and a reduced risk of heart disease. They help in fighting free radicals which could damage our cells and even lead to cancer.

Role in skin care : The exotic fruit is commonly used in natural remedies related to beauty because of its high antioxidant content as well as vitamins. Ancient beauty practices in the southeast says that regular application of dragon fruit flesh paste on the face help in slowing down the process of ageing and makes the skin look younger. The paste is also used in treating acne and sunburn.

High source of minerals : Dragon fruit is loaded with minerals like potassium and calcium which are required by the body to maintain bone structure. Regular consumption of potassium is extremely vital for cellular, electrical, nervous functions of our body. potassium plays a key role in maintaining water content, pH or acid balance in our body. Also, having a diet rich in potassium protects our heart and kidney.

Dragon fruit is one of the few fresh fruits that contain iron and one serving contains 8 per cent of your recommended daily intake (RDI). It also contains vitamin C, which helps your body absorb iron.

The fruit offers more magnesium than most fruits, with 18 per cent of RDI in just one cup. This vital mineral is present in every body cells and takes part in over 600 important chemical reactions within our body e.g. breakdown of food into energy, muscle contraction, bone formation and even the creation of DNA.

Maintains a healthy gut : Studies have indicated that imbalances in gut can lead to conditions like asthma and heart disease. Dragon fruit contains prebiotics and can potentially improve the balance of good bacteria in your gut. In particular, dragon fruit promotes the growth of two types of healthy bacteria: *lactic acid bacteria* and *bifidobacteria*. The research on the prebiotic activity of dragon fruit is limited to test-tube studies. More studies are needed to determine its true effect on the human gut.

ADVERSE EFFECTS

Overall, dragon fruit appears to be safe. However, some people may develop an allergic reaction in some rare cases. In two cases, women with no history of food allergies developed anaphylactic reactions after consuming a fruit mixture that contained dragon fruit. Testing confirmed that they had antibodies against dragon fruit in their blood.

HOW TO EAT DRAGON FRUIT

Although the dragon fruit's thick, leathery skin can be intimidating but surprisingly it's simple to prepare and can be eaten by itself or added to salads, smoothies and yogurt. One should select perfectly ripe fruit (one which is bright red). Like avocado and kiwi, a ripe dragon fruit should be soft but not mushy.

1. Using a sharp knife, cut it in half lengthwise.
2. Scoop out the fruit with a spoon, or cut it into cubes by cutting vertical and horizontal lines into the pulp without cutting into the peel. Push on the back of the skin to expose the cubes and remove them with a spoon or your fingers.

Dragon fruit is also available in the frozen section of some grocery stores pre-peeled and cut into cubes. This is a convenient option for a tasty snack that packs a nutrient-dense punch.

“Eat more fruits and vegetables”

This is probably the world’s most common health recommendation.