

Surprising saffron

There's more to these delicate strands than you'd expect. New research shows saffron can boost your mood.

By Amy Paturel, MS, MPH



Not just pretty: Saffron adds color and flavor, but it also attacks depression and even cancer.

It's the most expensive spice on Earth, and for good reason. It takes up to 75,000 handpicked blossoms—each with only 3 strands of saffron—to make just 1 pound of the high-maintenance ingredient. Why bother? Not only can a few threads add intense color and bold, honey-like flavor to an otherwise drab dish, but new research also shows that saffron offers plenty



Photograph by Leigh Beisch

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Flavor

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of unexpected health benefits, such as alleviating depression and even preventing cancer.

People who got 30 milligrams of saffron a day for 6 weeks reported the same improvement in their depression symptoms as those who received 20 milligrams of fluoxetine (a.k.a. Prozac), according to a preliminary study in the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*. "Saffron enhances the activity of [mood-boosting] neurotransmitters such as norepinephrine and dopamine," says Shahin Akhondzadeh-Basti, a clinical neuropsychopharmacology professor at Roozbeh Psychiatric Hospital in Tehran, Iran, the oldest academic psychiatric hospital in the Middle East.

And in another recent study published in *Cancer Detection and*

Prevention, researchers touted saffron's antitumor and cancer-preventive benefits. The spice is rich in antioxidants such as crocin, a carotenoid that helps prevent the spread and growth of cancer.

If you've never given saffron a shot because it's expensive (\$8 to \$12 per gram) or you don't know how to use it, then it's time to rethink this potent spice. For best results, opt for saffron threads rather than powder (powdered saffron can taste medicinal and may be diluted with cheaper spices like turmeric). Store it in a cool, dark place or in your freezer for up to 2 years. "Toast the threads in a dry pan for a few seconds, or rub them between your hands to release saffron's aroma and oils before steeping them in hot water," advises Joyce Goldstein,

a food consultant and cookbook author of *Saffron Shores* (Chronicle Books, 2002).

For every teaspoon of saffron in a recipe, add 5 teaspoons of liquid and soak for 20 minutes. If your dish includes broth or wine, pour a little of it over the saffron before making the recipe. And to make the most of your saffron, try the following simple ideas. (For more ideas and recipes, check out our sister publication's Web site, CookingLight.com.)

- Add a few threads to fish soup, chowders, bouillabaisse, or stews when you begin cooking them.
- Steam mussels with saffron and orange peels.
- Stir a few threads (about ¼ teaspoon) saffron into boiling water when making pasta or risotto. ➔

Cookies for breakfast?

These treats are healthy enough to start your day.

We'd love to sit down to a proper bowl of high-fiber cereal and fresh fruit every morning, but we often end up grabbing something on the run instead. So we were thrilled to find these cookies packed with enough nutrition to pull double duty as a great-tasting, on-the-go breakfast. Here are a few of our favorites.

Laura's Wholesome Junk Food Bite-lettes are cookie dough–like morsels developed by company founder Laura Trice, MD. Two cookies average 100 calories, 2 grams of protein, 5 grams of fat, and no cholesterol. These dried fruit– and fruit juice–sweetened bites come in flavors like Oatmeal Raisin and Oatmeal Chocolate Chip (our favorite), as well as Better Brownie (gluten-free). They cost about \$6 for a 7-ounce tub at Whole Foods Markets or www.lauraswholesomejunkfood.com.

Dancing Deer Baking Co. touts its Mountain Cookie as trail fare, meaning it's hearty enough to sustain you through meetings, errands, or whatever the morning sends your way. They're packed with oatmeal, molasses, sunflower seeds, dates, almonds, and dried apricots and cranberries. Each cookie has 150 calories, 2 grams of protein, and just 1 gram of saturated fat. They got our vote for most decadent-tasting. Seven-cookie packs cost \$4.99 at specialty grocers, and packs of two or more are available at www.dancingdeer.com.

Baker's Breakfast Cookies average 5 grams of fiber, 5 grams of fat, and 300 calories apiece, with no hydrogenated oils or trans fat. These dense cookies come in a dozen flavors, including Peanut Butter and Jelly, and Fruit and Nut. They are full of healthy ingredients like



oats, fruit purées, dried fruit, and molasses. Individually wrapped, they're a quick and convenient breakfast to go or energy booster before a morning workout. They're about \$1.50 per cookie at grocery stores, or \$19.99 for 12 at www.bbcookies.com. —Courtney Roush