

# The Power of Peppers

Sweet, Spicy, Hot—and Healthy!

by **lola akinmade-åkerström**

It's no secret peppers are among the spiciest foods on earth and when added to any dish, exponentially increase its tongue-burning factor.

There are two main types of peppers—chili (or hot) and sweet. Chili peppers contain a naturally occurring chemical component called capsaicin, which is responsible for their zing. In 1912, Chemist Wilbur Scoville developed a scale to measure the capsaicin potency of peppers, and the result ranks the hottest peppers and spices in the world according to heat units (SHU). Sweet peppers don't contain any noticeable traces of capsaicin.

Besides that additional kick chili peppers add to meals, these heat pods are chock-full of essential vitamins, fibers, antioxidants and health benefits such as certain cancer-fighting and immunity-boosting properties. "All varieties of peppers are a good source of vitamin C, beta-carotene and B vitamins. They contain flavonoids and phytochemicals to help reduce dangerous inflammation," shares nutritional scientist Melissa Hawthorne, R.D., of the Houstonian Hotel Club & Spa. "Red bell peppers have twice as much vitamin C as green peppers. The spicy peppers also have been shown to increase a person's metabolism, allowing them to burn a few more calories."

The vibrant colors of peppers play a major role in the types of vitamins and benefits they provide. Naturally occurring plant chemicals known as phytonutrients are what enhance their quality and give them flare. "Each pepper has its own unique nutrient make up. Orange, yellow, red, green and purple practically make up

a rainbow of health all on their own," says dietitian and food writer Jennifer Vagios. "Aim for a variety of color and you're off to a good start."


According to nutritionist Mary Barbour, R.D., black pepper stimulates digestion and prevents gas while the outside layer of peppercorn triggers the breakdown of fat cells.

Note: Indulging in peppers may come with digestive issues—from acid reflux and heartburn to indigestion and diarrhea, depending on an individual's tolerance to capsaicin. And in rare cases, consuming peppers can be fatal to those with severe allergic reactions to the chemical. "Spicy food can also cause insomnia," Barbour adds. "The body needs to slow down to sleep and spicy peppers rev up the body."

Consider this: Bell peppers rank zero SHU and Jalapeño peppers rank between 2,500 and 8,000 SHU. The hottest spice on earth, Blair's 16 Million Reserve, is 8,000 times hotter than your bottle of Tabasco sauce and measures in at 16,000,000 SHU (yes, million!). Made from raw capsaicin and sold in a tiny bottle, a single crystal from it can spice up a full pot. Sniffing the raw spice can cause fainting, and finishing the entire bottle at one go will most likely end your life.

So eat your peppers wisely. ♥

*Lola Akinmade-Åkerström is usually that friend who proudly holds up three fingers at Southeast Asian and Indian restaurants. "Yes, I want my Pad Thai or Chicken Tikka 'three peppers' spicy, please. I'll worry about digestive consequences later."*



Want to speed up your metabolism?  
Toss a hot pepper into the mix.