

Vegetable of the Month

Spinach



Spinach is believed to be of Persian origin and introduced into Europe in the 15th century (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia). Since the early 19th century, spinach has been a versatile and commonly used vegetable in the United States. Eating and preparing spinach is simple and easy, since it tastes good raw or cooked. Spinach can be found fresh, frozen, or canned; it can be easily incorporated into many dishes. Its versatility makes it easy to serve raw in salads or sandwiches or as a complement to soups, meat, fish, or other vegetable dishes.

In addition to being tasty, spinach's popularity stems from its high nutritional value. Not only is spinach low in calories, it is also a good source of iron and essential nutrients such as vitamins A and C, minerals, and fiber. Spinach also contains 3 grams of protein per serving.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size (100g)

Servings Per Container

Amount Per Serving

Calories 20 **Calories from Fat 5**

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 0g **0%**

Saturated Fat 0g **0%**

Cholesterol 0mg **0%**

Sodium 80mg **3%**

Total Carbohydrate 4g **1%**

Dietary Fiber 3g **12%**

Sugars 0g

Protein 3g

Vitamin A 130% • **Vitamin C 45%**

Calcium 10% • **Iron 15%**

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:

	Calories:	2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Saturated Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

Calories per gram:

Fat 9 • Carbohydrate 4 • Protein 4

Selection

At the supermarket, you can find spinach packaged fresh, canned, or frozen. Fresh spinach is usually found loose or bagged. For the best quality, select leaves that are green and crisp, with a nice fresh fragrance. Avoid leaves that are limp, damaged, or spotted. If you are in a rush, grab a bag of fresh, pre-washed spinach. The ready-to-eat packaging makes it easy to be on the go and still stay healthy.

Storage

Fresh spinach should be dried and packed loosely in a cellophane or plastic bag and stored in the refrigerator crisper. If stored properly, it should last 3 or 4 days.

Varieties



Flat or Smooth Leaf

Flat or smooth leaf spinach has unwrinkled, spade-shaped leaves that have a milder taste than the savoy. This variety is commonly used for canned and frozen spinach as well as for soups, baby foods, and other processed foods.



Savoy

Savoy has crinkly, dark green curly leaves. The texture is different from the flat leaf but tastes equally as good. Look for fresh bunches of savoy at your local market.



Semi-Savoy

Increasing in popularity is the semi-savoy variety, which has slightly curly leaves. The slightly curly leaves have a similar texture to the savoy leaves but are easier to clean. This variety is usually sold fresh. It is also found in processed foods.

Fresh spinach is available all year. Major supplies come from Texas and California where it grows as a cool winter crop.

Preparation

Spinach grows in sandy soil, so wash it thoroughly to get rid of the grainy, sandy particles. Make sure to tear off the stem. Separate the leaves, and place them in a large bowl of water. Gently wash leaves, and let the sand drift to the bottom of the bowl. Remove leaves from the water, and repeat the process with fresh water until the leaves are clean.

Special Note

Iron and calcium in plant foods are not highly absorbed by the body. Spinach contains a chemical called oxalic acid, which binds with iron and calcium and reduces the absorption of these minerals. To improve iron absorption, spinach should be eaten with vitamin C-rich foods such as orange juice, tomatoes, or citrus fruit.

If spinach is to be eaten raw, dry it completely by using a salad spinner or by blotting it with paper towels. Slightly damp spinach can be steamed or microwaved without adding any additional water.

Blanching

Drop leaves into a large pot of boiling water. Once the leaves slightly wilt, drain and squeeze out excess moisture. This method is used to quick-cook spinach or to prepare it for sautéing, braising, or stuffing, and usually takes 2 to 5 minutes.

Microwaving

This method can be used instead of blanching. Place washed, slightly wet

spinach in a microwavable dish, loosely cover, and cook until tender (4 to 7 minutes for 1/2 pound of spinach).

Sautéing

Blanched spinach can be sautéed quickly with a quick spray of oil. If cooked in a non-stick pan, only a spray is needed for several cups of chopped spinach. Try adding some garlic for flavor.

Steaming

If you plan to steam the spinach, do not dry leaves after washing. Steamed spinach makes a great side dish and usually takes only 5 to 10 minutes.

Make Spinach Part of Your 5 A Day Plan



- Use fresh spinach to make a tasty, healthy salad. Add some other colorful fruits or vegetables, along with your favorite low-fat salad dressing.
- Add chopped spinach to lasagna and soup.
- Stir yogurt into chopped or puréed spinach for a low-fat version of creamed spinach.
- Try stir-frying spinach with garlic, onion, and chopped red bell peppers for a colorful tasty side dish.
- Buy it bagged and ready to use for quicker meals.

Recipes

Chicken Florentine

Makes 4 servings

Each serving is equal to one and one-half 5 A Day servings

Source: Produce for Better Health

- 4 cups firmly packed baby spinach leaves, washed with stems removed, or 1 10 oz package frozen, chopped spinach
- 1 tsp dried thyme leaves, crushed or 2 tsp fresh
- 1 Tbsp olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped
- 1/2 cup finely chopped onion
- 1 Tbsp flour
- 1 cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 4 grilled or roasted skinless chicken breasts, shredded or chopped
- 2 lemons, to yield 2 Tbsp grated lemon peel and 4 lemon wedges for garnish

Place spinach in a large skillet over medium heat. Cover and cook until fresh spinach is wilted or frozen spinach is heated through. Spinach should have a dark, rich green color. Do not overcook, or the spinach will change color. Remove spinach, and drain well.

In the same skillet, heat thyme with oil, garlic, and onion. Sauté until onion is transparent. Stir in flour until it disappears. Add broth and stir continuously until a thickened sauce is formed. Return chopped spinach to sauce and mix well. Heat and adjust seasonings, if desired.

Stir half the chicken into sauce. To serve, spoon equal amounts in four small casseroles. Top each with equal portions of remaining chicken and 1/2 Tbsp grated lemon peel. Place in preheated 300° F oven for 10 minutes. Serve piping hot with a lemon wedge.

Nutritional analysis per serving: calories 220, protein 31g, fat 7g, percent calories from fat 29%, cholesterol 75mg, carbohydrates 8g, fiber 3g, sodium 150mg

Spinach and Crab Dip

Makes 8 servings

Each serving equals one 5 A Day serving

Source: National Cancer Institute

2 (10 oz) packages frozen, chopped spinach

1 cup non-fat sour cream

1 cup non-fat mayonnaise

1/4 cup onion, minced

4 oz imitation crabmeat

2 cups assorted colorful raw vegetables for dipping

Thaw spinach, and pat dry. Combine spinach with remaining ingredients, and stir. Cover and refrigerate for at least an hour before serving with colorful raw vegetables.

Nutritional analysis per serving: calories 102, protein 5g, fat 1g, percent calories from fat 11%, cholesterol 62mg, carbohydrates 16g, fiber 1g, sodium 411mg

Emerald Spinach Soup with Tomato

Makes 6 servings

Each serving is equal to two and one-half 5 A Day servings

Source: Produce for Better Health Foundation

- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, peeled and crushed
- 4 stalks celery, chopped
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 6 cups firmly packed leaf spinach or 2 (10 oz) packages frozen leaf spinach
- 2 1/2 cups low-sodium chicken broth diluted with 1 1/2 cups water
- 1 tsp dry oregano leaves, crushed
- 2 cups diced tomatoes



If you're using fresh spinach, remove any large stems and wash thoroughly.

In deep, heavy soup pot over medium heat, place onion, garlic, celery, and cumin with olive oil. Stir and sauté for about 5 minutes.

Add spinach to pan. Stir well. Lower heat and cover. Allow all vegetables to steep until spinach is wilted and partially cooked. If you're using frozen spinach, cooking will take a bit longer. Add chicken broth with oregano and bring to a low boil. Gently cook, covered, 20 to 25 minutes.

Blend soup mixture (1 1/2 cups at a time) in blender or food processor until smooth. Return entire soup mixture to pan, and reheat. Soup will be a rich green color. Just before serving, add 1 3/4 cups diced tomato and heat. Season to taste with salt and pepper, if desired. Tomato should be hot but not truly cooked.

To serve, ladle hot soup into warm bowls and garnish with an optional dollop of fat-free sour cream and reserved 1/4 cup diced tomatoes. Serve hot.

Nutritional analysis per serving(without sour cream): calories 97, protein 9g, fat 2g, percent calories from fat 19%, cholesterol 1mg, carbohydrates 10g, fiber 3g, sodium 443mg

Creamy Spinach Soup

Makes 4 servings

Each serving is equal to one 5 A Day serving

5 oz frozen spinach

1 large baking potato (8 oz), peeled and thinly sliced

4 scallions, coarsely chopped

2 garlic cloves, chopped

1 cup low-sodium chicken broth diluted with 1 1/4 cups water

1/4 tsp pepper

1/8 tsp salt

3/4 cup low-fat (1%) milk

1 tsp unsalted butter

2 Tbsp grated Parmesan cheese

In a large saucepan, combine spinach, potato, scallions, garlic, diluted broth, pepper, and salt. Cover and bring to a boil over high heat. Then reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer until potato is tender, about 15 minutes.

Transfer solids to food processor or blender and process to a smooth puree. Return puree to saucepan. Stir in milk and butter and warm soup over medium heat, stirring frequently.

Ladle soup into bowls and sprinkle with Parmesan.

Nutritional analysis per serving: calories 108, protein 5g, fat 3.6g, percent calories from fat 30%, cholesterol 8mg, carbohydrate 15g, fiber 2.2g, sodium 433mg