

## Great Grapes

Grapes are great, tasty little treats that come in lots of different colours. Better yet, grapes are full of healthy compounds. And, grapes are the center to one of the world's greatest perplexing nutritional questions.

Nutritionally, grapes are power packed. Grapes are a good source of manganese, vitamin B6, thiamin, riboflavin, potassium, vitamin C, fibre and antioxidants. Resveratrol is the most popular antioxidant in grapes. Resveratrol is a potent antioxidant. It's found in highest concentration in the skins of grapes. (*J Chromatography 1996*) Resveratrol provides more effective protection against free radical damage than other well-known antioxidants, such as vitamins C and E. (*Neuroreport 1997*) Thereby, resveratrol is a potent cancer fighter and protector against heart disease.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in Canada. This has sparked interest in dietary patterns of countries with lower rates of heart disease, such as France, whose rate is 60% less than ours. However, French cuisine is rich, particularly in fat. How is it that the rich France cuisine is partnered by a slender and healthy population? This, the French Paradox, is perhaps the most perplexing question of current nutrition.

One key difference between the two diets is the large consumption of red wine. Many liked to believe it was the alcohol. However, more recent studies have noted that it isn't necessarily the red wine, but the purple grapes it's derived from.

Can grapes really improve heart health? According to science, research strongly supports grapes as a heart healthy food. In the 2001 June edition of *Circulation* researchers concluded that drinking purple grape juice has a direct effect on blood clotting and increases the blood levels of antioxidants. Also, the flavonoids in grapes have been noted to positively effect nitric oxide production helping reduce the narrowing of arteries. And, purple grape juice can inhibit platelet clotting, thereby reducing the risk of stroke and heart attacks. (*J Nutr 2000, Circulation 2001*) Or, perhaps more convincing to Canadians is research in *Atherosclerosis* (2001) which reported a lowering of total cholesterol by grape juice similar to the lowering effect of red wine. Therefore, it appears that grapes have many positive effects on the body and cardiovascular system.

How do you find the most nutritionally packed grape? First, choose purple grapes as they are used in red wine and noted in the studies above. Second, choose organic. Plants produce flavonoids (i.e. antioxidants) as a response to environmental stress. Organically grown food faces more environmental stress. It's scientifically proven that organic foods can have up to 50% more antioxidant power than conventional grown foods. (*JAF 2003*)

Of note, grape juice also reduces hot flashes, reduces risk of post-menopausal diseases (e.g. osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease and breast cancer) and, may prevent Alzheimer's. Plus its great antioxidant ability means it may be anti-aging. Health can come in small packages. Tasty ones at that. Reach for organic grapes and pure grape juice this fall and enjoy health.

Allison Tannis, MSc. is bridging science and the public as host of Healthy Living, and writer for international publications.