

# Popcorn

Popcorn is truly a food of the Americas. An ear of popcorn, discovered in a bat cave in New Mexico, was determined to be more than 5,000 years old. It is believed that popcorn originated in Mexico but by the time Columbus arrived in America, popcorn was being enjoyed by Native American tribes throughout North and South America.

At the first Thanksgiving feast at Plymouth, Massachusetts, the English colonists were introduced to popcorn. Later, colonial women made the first tasty breakfast cereal by pouring milk and sugar over popcorn.

Popcorn is a whole grain food. There are three main parts to each kernel - endosperm, germ and the pericarp or hull. Stored in the starchy endosperm is a small amount of water. When the kernel is heated to around 450°F, that tiny bit of moisture turns to steam, creating pressure inside the hull. Because the hull is hard, the pressure builds until the hull breaks and the endosperm explodes. The kernel actually turns inside out.

Popcorn was very popular from the 1890s until the early part of the twentieth century. During the Depression, popcorn at 5 cents a bag was one of the few luxuries families could afford.

Sugar was sent overseas for U.S. troops during World War II, which meant there wasn't much sugar left in the States to make candy. As a result Americans ate three times as much popcorn as usual.

Going to the movie theater and eating popcorn there was very popular until the early 1950s when televisions began appearing in many homes. As attendance at the movies dropped so did popcorn consumption. However, eating popcorn at home gradually increased, and sales rebounded.

We Americans consume more than 18 billion quarts of popcorn each year. That amounts to about 56 quarts for every person in the US. Many people closely associate popcorn with the movies, but recent studies point out that the most popcorn is eaten at home. The convenience of microwave packaging has made popcorn an anytime snack. Some workers keep a package in their desk for an emergency lunch using the office microwave.

If you use microwave packages for convenience, you should compare the Nutrition Facts labels on the product boxes. It can be very confusing to decipher, but here is what to look for concerning popcorn. The information at the top of the Nutrition Facts label indicates the size of a serving and how many servings in each bag. If you are not sharing it, opt for the smaller, snack-size bags to limit your portion. For example, one bag of microwave popcorn may contain three servings per bag. If one person eats the entire bag of popcorn, it would be three times the fat, sodium and carbohydrates listed on the label per serving.

Before selecting from the many microwave varieties in the grocery, carefully compare the total fat amounts and select the lowest for optimum healthy snacking. Avoid products with trans fat and try to select a variety with low or zero saturated fat. Also notice the sodium amounts and try to select the lowest.

Although microwave popcorn varieties are very convenient, it can be healthier and less expensive to pop your own. Many styles of poppers are available, including air poppers, which are considered to be the healthiest method since no oil is added. When air-popped, one cup of popped popcorn contains only 31 calories. Every tablespoon of oil used for popping in other methods adds about 100 calories.

It isn't necessary to buy a special appliance. Any cooking utensil with a handle such as a covered frying pan or saucepan may be used for home popping, allowing room for the corn's expansion. Pans with relatively thick bottoms are easier to maintain at high temperatures without burning the corn. A popper with a stirring rod in the cover to agitate the popping corn is easier to use than a pan which must be shaken.

When popping corn, use a 1 to 4 ratio of oil to popcorn in a large heavy pan with a lid. For example, use 2 tablespoons of oil with ½ cup popcorn. As a general rule, one ounce of un-popped popcorn equals a quart popped. Use salad oils or any brand of commercial shortening. Butter or margarine will not stand the heat necessary to pop corn and may give an unpleasant burned flavor.

Put the oil in the pan over medium-high heat and put in 2 or 3 kernels; when they sizzle and spin around add the rest of the popcorn and the lid. Cook shaking constantly until the popping stops. Remove from heat immediately. The best results are obtained when popping begins in about a minute and is finished in another minute.

If your popcorn doesn't pop into fluffy, white kernels it probably has lost its moisture content. You should store the popcorn in an airtight container in a cool cupboard for up to a year. To recondition the kernels, fill a quart jar three-fourths full with dry popcorn kernels and add one tablespoon of water. Cover and shake frequently, every five to 10 minutes, until all of the water has been absorbed. After two to four days of storage in the closed jar, the corn should again be ready for perfect popping.

Freshly popped unbuttered popcorn can be kept in air-tight containers at room temperature for up to two weeks. Buttered popcorn should be refrigerated. To recrisp popcorn, place in a single layer in a baking pan with shallow sides, like a jelly roll pan) and heat at 325°F for 5 to 10 minutes.

Some people like to add salt before popping but this makes the popcorn tough, so wait until it's finished. Or better yet, skip the salt and add a salt-free seasoning.

Popcorn is quite low in calories and high in fiber. It is considered a healthy, whole-grain snack. What we do to the popcorn before we eat it can add lots of unhealthy sodium and fat. Every tablespoon of melted butter added after popping increases the calorie count by 100.

When you cook the corn on top the stove with oil, salt and other seasonings will stick to the popped corn without additional margarine or butter. To help dry seasonings stick to air popped corn, try a quick spritz with butter-flavored cooking spray or regular nonstick vegetable spray.

Here are some tasty ways to flavor popcorn without adding extra calories and sodium. Start with freshly popped corn. Combine the seasonings as indicated for each type of popcorn described below and sprinkle over 4 cups of popcorn; toss gently.

- Cheese Corn - ¼ to ½ cup (1-2 ounces) finely shredded Cheddar cheese (at room temperature)
- Curry Corn - About ½ to ¾ teaspoon curry powder
- Curry Mix - 1 teaspoon curry powder, ¾ teaspoon tumeric, ¾ teaspoon ginger, and a pinch of cayenne pepper
- Hot Corn - For true fire-eaters, shake on ½ teaspoon chili powder and ¼ teaspoon dried crushed red pepper. (Make sure you have plenty of liquid refreshments on hand)
- Italian Popcorn - ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese, 1 tablespoon dried whole oregano, and ½ teaspoon garlic salt
- Nutcorn - Toss with 1 cup of your favorite nuts
- Pizza Corn - 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese, 1 teaspoon crushed Italian seasoning, ½ teaspoon onion powder, and ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- Sweet Corn - 2 teaspoons sugar and ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Vanilla Corn - Stir ½ to 1 teaspoon vanilla extract into melted butter before tossing it the popcorn. For variations, check your spice shelf. You might enjoy peppermint extract, rum flavoring, or maple flavoring.
- Cajun-Style - Seasoning mix: 2 teaspoons paprika, ½ teaspoon red pepper, ½ teaspoon white pepper, ½ teaspoon black pepper, 2 teaspoons onion powder, ¼ teaspoon oregano, ¼ teaspoon thyme, and 1/8 teaspoon celery seed. This makes about 6 teaspoons of seasoning mix. To use, add 1 teaspoon of the mix to 4 cups buttered popcorn. Store remaining seasoning mix in an air-tight container.

### **French Toast Popcorn**

Cooking Spray	1 tablespoon butter
8 cups popcorn (popped without butter, oil or salt)	½ tsp salt
½ cup maple syrup	½ tsp cinnamon

Preheat oven to 300°. Coat a large baking pan and a large mixing bowl with cooking spray. Place popcorn in the bowl. Combine syrup, butter, salt, and cinnamon in small saucepan over medium heat. Bring to a boil, stirring only until combined. Cook without stirring for 2 minutes. Pour syrup mixture over popcorn in a steady stream, stirring to coat. Spread popcorn mixture in an even layer in the baking pan. Bake for 15 minutes. Allow to cool completely in the pan

*Yield: 16 servings, 1/2 cup each Nutrition Information Per Serving: Calories - 50; Fat-1g; Carbohydrate-10g; Fiber-1g; Sodium-80mg*

Let's keep popcorn America's healthy snack.

For more trivia about popcorn, go to [www.popcorn.org](http://www.popcorn.org)

A source for this article was <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/efnep/web/popcorn.pdf>

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