

Popcorn: Is It A Good Snack

POPCORN HAS the crunchy, salty appeal of chips or pretzels, but you can have 3 cups of the air-popped snack for slightly fewer calories than you'll find in one sourdough pretzel. Perhaps that explains the huge increase in demand for bagged popcorn. According to market research firm Mintel, 54 percent of Americans surveyed in 2016 had purchased ready-to-eat popcorn in the previous six months, and sales topped \$1 billion. "That's 100 percent growth from four years ago," says Caleb Bryant, a senior analyst at Mintel.

Manufacturers of bagged brands have capitalized on popcorn's relatively healthy reputation, splashing the front of the packages with such claims as "whole grain," "gluten-free," and "50 percent less fat." Many brands also boast the calorie count per cup. Even some of the popcorn brand names—such as SkinnyPop and Smartfood—make the products sound like health foods, if not outright diet aids.

Consumer Reports' food testing team set out to see how well bagged popcorn lived up to its health claims and whether there were any meaningful differences in nutrition and taste among brands.

Health Perks of (Plain) Popcorn

Though you might not think to put it in the same category as whole-wheat bread or steel-cut oats, popcorn is a whole grain, which research has shown can help your health. A 2016 review of 45 studies published in the British Medical Journal found that eating three servings of whole grains per day was linked to a 22 percent reduction in cardiovascular disease risk and a 15 percent reduced risk of cancer. It's also a good source of antioxidants, compounds that can prevent cell damage.

Of course, a popcorn's healthfulness depends on the ingredients—and the amount of them—it contains, says Beth Kitchin, Ph.D., R.D.N., assistant professor of nutrition sciences at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. A little salt and oil, or sugar in a kettle corn, may not hurt. "But if you're loading it up, you can get into trouble," she says.

How to Read a Popcorn Bag Label

We looked at the original or the most basic sea salt variety of five bagged brands: Angie's Boomchickapop; Cape Cod; Popcorn, Indiana; SkinnyPop; and Smartfood. All of them had just three ingredients—popcorn, oil, and salt—and contained 70 to 78 calories, 3 to 5 grams of fat, and 40 to 117 mg of sodium per 2-cup serving. That put them in the Good or Fair rating category for nutrition. The fat and sodium counts cost them a higher rating, says Consumer Reports nutritionist Ellen Kloss. Still, any of the five popcorns makes a healthier choice than chips or pretzels. The fronts of the packages boast the calorie count per cup. But flip to the back of the bag, and you might start to feel like you need a calculator in hand. That's because the values listed in the Nutrition Facts label are for 1 ounce, and the cup measure for that amount is 3 3/4 to 4 cups, depending on the brand. To level the popcorn playing field, we consistently used 2 cups in our ratings, which is also what we believe is a good-sized snack. If you eat an ounce (the serving size listed on the bag), you're in chip territory, nutritionally speaking.

For the most part, our tested popcorns' nutrition was in line with their front-of-the-bag claims. The one surprise was SkinnyPop, a brand that has had a greater percentage growth in sales over the past few years than its biggest competitors. Given its name, a consumer might well think that SkinnyPop is lower in calories and fat, but it actually contains more of both than the other four popcorns have. On its website the company defines "skinny" not as diet-friendly but as "using the fewest, cleanest and simplest ingredients possible."

"Even when they know a product isn't exactly a health food, people tend to choose products they perceive to be even a little bit healthier than similar ones—and they may eat more of it as a result," says Temple Northup, Ph.D., who is director of the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication at the University of Houston and has studied the effects of health claims on consumer attitudes and knowledge.

All five brands performed well in our taste tests. Angie's Boomchickapop Sea Salt snagged an Excellent rating for its toasted-corn flavor and crispy-crunchy texture. Cape Cod Seaside Pop Sea Salt even had a tasty flavor similar to that of unbuttered movie popcorn.

Are Cheesy and Sweet Styles Worse?

We reviewed two "sister" popcorns (one cheesy and one sweet) to each of the five brands' basic varieties in our tests. For some, the calorie, fat, and sodium differences were less than you might expect. For example, 2 cups of Cape Cod's sinful-sounding Salted Caramel had 10 more calories, less than 1 additional gram of fat, and about 80 more mg of sodium than its Sea Salt variety. Two cups of Boomchickapop White Cheddar had 50 more calories, about 4 more grams of fat, and 143 additional mg of sodium than its sea salt flavor. In the sweetened ones, the sugars content ranged from less than 1 gram to 17.6 grams per 2-cup serving.

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