



## **“Changing Perceptions – The Nutritional Benefits of Potatoes”**

Fresh potatoes are the only major carbohydrate grown in Ireland, and form the basis of a very important industry in Ireland. All other carbohydrates are largely imported - the Irish crop has lower food miles and definite advantages in terms for freshness and nutrient availability. From a nutrition point of view and a sustainability point of view potatoes are an essential component in a varied and balanced diet.

### **A little bit of history:**

Historically potatoes played an essential role in the diet especially pre famine providing a healthy balance of unprocessed carbohydrates, calcium and essential vitamins and minerals when combined with milk.

### **Why is there a perception that potatoes are a ‘problem’ food in our diet?**

No doubt this comes from the recent overweight and obesity statistics for Ireland which does not make for pretty reading from the recent Healthy Ireland Report.

Earlier this year, a WHO study suggested that Ireland is on track to become the fattest country in Europe by 2030 such is the escalation in obesity in Ireland in more recent years. They estimate that by 2030 in Ireland, 85% of women will be overweight and 57% obese and 89% of men will be overweight and 48% will be obese (Webber et al. The European Obese Model: the shape of things to come. European Association for Cardiovascular Prevention & Rehabilitation Amsterdam, 2014).

### **Carbo-phobia strikes hard and tries to take over the weight loss market!**

Weight loss is big business and low carbohydrate diets are seriously trendy! The Paleo diet was the most googled diet in 2013 and there was a re-birth of the Atkins diet and low carbohydrate eating generally but what's the evidence for low carb eating and weight loss? It would seem to have lost a bit of momentum towards the end of 2015 but there is still big interest in this area. Interestingly the obesity crisis in Ireland was not as serious when

potato consumption was twice, three times, or if you go back far enough 20 times what it is today! Which leads to the question what does the evidence tell us about diets and weight loss?

To put it simply, the evidence tells us that diets don't work. A far more advantageous approach is a wellness approach. In fact research demonstrates that only 2% of people worldwide who follow a diet to lose weight actually maintain weight loss. In fact most people who follow a diet to lose weight will actually end up heavier long term.

### **A little bit of science:**

Carbohydrates are an essential nutrient in the body. Its main function is for energy, however, it must be noted that it is the only energy source that is readily available for the brain to use. Therefore, adequate carbohydrate intake is essential for brain function. Carbohydrates play an additional and even more important role with athletes when they prepare their body for peak performance on the sporting field. In fact, at a recent international sports nutrition conference one of the worlds most eminent Sports Dietitian, Louise Burke's main message was: "When the going gets tough, the tough get carbohydrates+"

It is important that the public are made aware that not all carbohydrates are bad for you or make you fat! Despite the fact that there is a lot of negativity in the media around carbohydrates, we know that they are an essential part of a balanced and varied diet. Just like with other macronutrients (protein and fat) it is the amount and type you eat that is important.

### **What carbohydrates 'should' we choose:**

The best choices are carbohydrate sources that are unprocessed and low in fat. There are many choices for the modern consumer with regards carbohydrate sources: potatoes, rice, pasta, noodles, quinoa, couscous. However, it must be noted that potatoes are the most unprocessed of all of these choices.

### **Why eat potatoes:**

- Potatoes form part of a healthy diet - there is no evidence that avoiding potatoes is good for us - the ultimate unprocessed food.
- Great source of potassium. Potassium is mineral that helps to maintain normal muscle function and importantly normal blood pressure. An average potato contains 18% of the RDA for potassium for the day.
- Excellent source of vitamin C. This helps with the absorption of iron and helps prevent anaemia and support the immune system. Vitamin C is also a powerful antioxidant. A potato contains more vitamin C than a tomato or same portion of sweet potato.
- Contain a variety of B vitamins (thiamine, niacin, riboflavin, folate and B6). These help with your metabolism and making sure you get the best energy from your food.
- Source of calcium, magnesium and phosphorus in smaller amounts.

NSIFCS (North/South Irish Food Consumption Study) identified that potatoes are an important source of vitamins and minerals in the Irish population.

Potatoes contributed:

- 27% vitamin C intake
- 17% Folate intake
- 10% Iron intake
- 20% Dietary Fibre
- 11% Energy
- 17% Carbohydrate
- 7% fat intake
- 6% protein intake

### **Things you may not know about the powerful potato:**

- They are low in fat & saturated fat which help keep your heart healthy
- Low sugar food
- No salt
- Naturally gluten free so suitable for people with coeliac disease
- Suitable for all vegetarian and vegan diets
- An average baked potato in its skin has more fibre than 2 slices of wholemeal bread
- **Potatoes are FODMAP friendly:** The low FODMAP (Fermentable Oligosaccharides, Disaccharides, Monosaccharides and Polyols) diet is gaining global momentum as a successful strategy to manage the symptoms of IBS (Irritable Bowel Syndrome) and functional gut disorders. IBS affects about 15% of the population and people can suffer from debilitating symptoms. The low FODMAP diet, when delivered by a FODMAP trained Dietitian, has been shown to be effective in up to 75% of cases. The potato is a low FODMAP food and therefore is very popular amongst low FODMAPers!!
- Potatoes are grown in practically every culture on the planet and sustain whole populations of countries . but this is what makes them exciting - there are recipes & ethnic uses of potatoes from every country in the World

### **Top tips:**

- Watch your portions - like all foods potatoes should be enjoyed in moderate amounts for best health.
- Don't peel it - always eat the skin too. The skin is a great source of fibre and an average baked potato in its skin has more fibre than 2 slices of wholemeal bread!
- Don't add high fat foods - limit the amount of butter, full fat cheese and sour cream on your potatoes as they add unnecessary calories and fat
- Variety is the spice of life so don't make the same boiled potatoes every day - be inventive as potatoes are super versatile in cooking

- Go for baked (with skin), boiled, steamed or add to a salad or omelette

**Conclusion:**

In Ireland we need to re-think potatoes and how they have an important place in a balanced and varied diet. In line with many other traditional habits that we have lost, as a nation we need to re learn how to use potatoes as an ingredient in a range of traditional and ethnic foods - there are many great recipes on [www.potato.ie](http://www.potato.ie).

We must not forget the basic fact that carbohydrates are essential for life. When choosing carbohydrates let's move back our focus on smart carbohydrate choices and choose unprocessed varieties. For health and weight loss we need to move away from the idea that following a diet is the best approach and instead move to a place where we are focusing on wellness, eating intuitively and moving naturally. No doubt these are some of the healthy habits that were common with our ancestors and something we should aim to reclaim.

Thankfully . this new joint Bord Bia and Potato industry potato campaign can empower Irish people to do just this, and in so doing increase consumption of potatoes at different times of the day, and in many different & exciting ways . currently there are almost 40 brand new tasty recipes to enjoy on [www.potato.ie](http://www.potato.ie), with many more under development.

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