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## HEALTH

# 5 Surprising Health Benefits of Watermelon

This luscious summer fruit is a secret superfood for people over 50

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Few things are more refreshing than crisp, juicy watermelon on a hot summer's day. But don't think of it as just an emblem of warm-weather fun. Consider it a dietary powerhouse. Watermelon is packed with nutrients that can make a big difference as you age, including some you won't find more of in any other fresh fruit or vegetable. "When we're looking to put healthy things in our diet, what a gift that we can have something like watermelon that is naturally sweet,

delicious, filling and just chock-full of beneficial nutrients,” says Samantha Cassetty, registered dietitian in New York.



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Here are five reasons you should add watermelon to your shopping list:

### 1. Helps your skin look younger

Beyond the refreshment factor, this may be why watermelon is the ultimate summertime fruit: It's bursting with lycopene, the plant compound that makes tomatoes red. Studies have found it can protect your skin from UV radiation. Lycopene has benefits both inside your body and on your skin — you can even buy [sunscreen](#) made with it. For years, scientists considered tomatoes the best food source of the substance. But, it turns out, ruby-red watermelon provides 40 percent more than raw tomatoes.

“Watermelon is really, really, really one of the best sources of lycopene,” says Diane McKay, an assistant professor in the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at the Tufts University School of Medicine. “Tomatoes are another source, but [you have to cook the tomato](#) to get most of the lycopene released from the cell. With watermelon, you don't have to do anything — you just cut it and eat it.”

Lycopene isn't the fruit's only source of sun protection. A two-cup serving also contributes one-quarter to one-half of your daily dose of vitamin C, which also protects your skin from damage due to UV rays.

But beware: While these plant-based nutrients can help you fend off harmful rays, you still need to use sunscreen. Think of watermelon as a second line of defense — an internal one.

Lycopene and vitamin C do more to keep your skin looking youthful. Both nutrients also support collagen, which provides structure. That can help prevent fine lines and wrinkles.

As part of a balanced diet, “it could help your skin age better, with fewer signs of premature wrinkling and aging,” Cassetty says.

### 2. Protects your eyes

Bugs Bunny's favorite snack isn't the only food that can help safeguard your vision. Like [carrots](#), watermelon boasts several nutrients that can lower your risk of age-related macular degeneration and cataracts.



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Looking for a new way to enjoy your new favorite melon? Try José Andrés' recipe for [Watermelon & Feta Salad](#) from AARP's Members Edition.

- **Lycopene:** One study found that lycopene may reduce your risk of macular degeneration by as much as 30 percent. Other research has found it can help protect you from cataracts.
- **Vitamin C:** Getting vitamin C from a diet rich in fruits and vegetables — [rather than from supplements](#) — has been linked to lower risk of cataracts.
- **Lutein and zeaxanthin:** A 2022 study published in the journal *Nutrients* looked at data from more than 50,000 Americans. It found that participants who ate watermelon had [higher levels of lutein and zeaxanthin](#) than those who didn't. That pair of plant compounds is important for eye health.
- **Vitamin A:** Watermelon also provides some vitamin A, the nutrient that gives carrots their reputation as a vision-booster.

More research is needed to definitively link watermelon to eye health. But thanks to all those benefits, the renowned [Cleveland Clinic](#) recommends it.

### 3. Lowers blood pressure

An amino acid you may have never heard of, L-citrulline, helps keep your blood vessels in good shape. And watermelon might be the best food source around.

In 2021, researchers compared earlier studies of how watermelon and citrulline affect cardio-metabolic health. Eight papers looked at blood pressure. Seven of them found that [eating watermelon flesh, juice or extract helped to lower it](#).

Citrulline “is really good for your blood vessels,” Cassetty says. “And anytime you have flexible blood vessels that can widen and allow blood to flow and don’t get stiff or sludgy, that’s what you really want.”

Just like with your skin and eyes, more than one nutrient contributes here. Lycopene comes up again — it helps manage high blood pressure, too. Plus, watermelon provides some potassium, which can ease the BP-raising effects of too much sodium.



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## 4. Improves your diet

There’s a reason it’s called watermelon — the fruit is 92 percent water. Thanks to all that H<sub>2</sub>O, a two-cup serving has just 90 calories. But it still gives you hearty portions of numerous nutrients. And research suggests that adding watermelon to your diet helps you eat better overall.

The 2022 study published in the journal *Nutrients* found people who’d noshed on watermelon ate significantly healthier diets than those who hadn’t. They consumed less unhealthy fat and added sugar, as well as more nutrients like fiber, magnesium, potassium, and vitamins A and C; and more antioxidants like lycopene and beta-carotene.

Another study looked at how [watermelon may help you eat less overall](#). In it, a group of overweight or obese people enjoyed two cups of watermelon daily for four weeks. After a break, they ate a caloric-equivalent daily cookie for another four weeks. Even though the two snacks had the same number of calories, the participants’ body weight went up after a month of cookie-eating, and down after watermelon. Participants said they felt full for up to two hours after eating melon, but only 20 minutes post-cookie.

That’s probably due to the combination of fiber and water in the melon, according to McKay. First, fiber helps to slow your body’s absorption of sugar. “At the same time, the fiber in



combination with the water in the watermelon can help bulk up that mass in your stomach and make you feel fuller for a longer period of time,” she says, “and therefore reduce your appetite.”

## 5. Watermelon rind and seeds add extra fiber and nutrients

If you're like most people, you only eat the red part of this quintessential summer fruit. But just like its botanical cousin, the cucumber, every part of watermelon is edible. When you eat the rind — which makes up a whopping 40 percent of the melon — you're not only freeing up space in a landfill. You're getting some major health perks.

For instance, the watermelon rind contains less sugar and more than 10 times as much fiber as the watermelon flesh. It also provides 50 percent more blood pressure-lowering citrulline. While watermelon rind extract isn't the same as eating the rind itself, it's been found to have cancer-fighting properties.

“There's no need to throw out the [rind](#) unless you really want to,” Cassetty says. “Using all parts of the fruit will cut down on food waste, and also it brings some unexpected benefit with all these nutrients.”

Once you realize how many ways there are to use the rind, you may never toss it again. Try making watermelon rind pickles. Or take Cassetty's suggestions: Chop the rind and add it to hot or cold soups, smoothies and stir-fries.

Just be sure to wash the outside of your watermelon thoroughly first. Any bacteria on there when the knife goes in can get pulled into the flesh, which may lead to foodborne illness.

As for watermelon seeds, the black ones have plenty to offer. They're even higher in fiber than the rind, and they contain both protein and healthy fats. These days, though, more than 90 percent of watermelon in the United States is seedless. If you're lucky enough to find a melon with seeds, don't waste them on a seed-spitting contest. Roast them as you would pumpkin seeds to enjoy as a snack, in trail mix or on top of salads.

McKay cautions: Be sure to chew them up. If you swallow seeds whole, most of the nutrients go right through you. “You have to do something to help break open the cells, to release the nutrients when you're digesting them,” she says. Plus, you might grow a watermelon in your stomach if you eat them whole, right Mom?

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*Debbie Koenig is a New York-based writer whose work has appeared in The New York Times, Eating Well, WebMD, and dozens of other publications.*

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