
I'm an RD, and Here's Why Lemons Are One of the Best Foods to Eat for Longevity

Kristy Del Coro 2 days ago



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Growing up in a Greek-American household, in addition to an abundance of extra virgin olive oil, mountain oregano, and fresh garlic, there was one other ingredient inevitably used in nearly every dish created, *and* served alongside nearly every meal—lemon. And by “used,” I mean not just as a garnish or finishing squeeze to a dish, to eat lemon for longevity means making them truly an integral ingredient by incorporating them in significant amounts and consuming them daily.

As a registered dietitian, I started to wonder if perhaps this ubiquitous citrus fruit may be one of the key benefits of the [Mediterranean diet](#)—in addition to the [good fats](#) from olive oil and seafood and plethora of vitamins and minerals from plant-based ingredients. In fact, the Mediterranean region where lemons reign supreme is home to two of the five [Blue Zones](#)—the island of Ikaria in Greece and the island of Sardinia in

Italy. Lemons are also listed as one of [eight key fruits to consume](#) as part of [the Blue Zone diet](#). Read on to learn what makes lemons so good for us and how you can start using them more in everyday cooking.

Lemon health benefits

First and foremost, lemons are a good source of vitamin C, containing about 50 percent of the recommended daily amount in a single lemon and about 20 percent of the recommended daily amount in just two tablespoons of lemon juice. As a powerful antioxidant, [vitamin C helps to support immune function](#) and protects the skin from free radicals and visible signs of aging along with adequate hydration. Hello, lemon water! And the power of lemons is not just in their juice.

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In fact, most of the antioxidant acting flavonoids are [found in the skin or the whole fruit](#), not the juice alone. [Studies have found citrus flavonoids to be cardioprotective](#) by improving blood flow and lowering cholesterol, as well as improve glucose tolerance and insulin sensitivity, suppress inflammation, and have anticarcinogenic benefits. [Lemon polyphenols may also have anti-aging benefits](#), according to research published in *Nature* journal. The citric acid in lemons may also help prevent the formation of kidney stones.

Lemons in everyday cooking

Lemon adds acid, one of the key flavor elements of a balanced dish. Similar

to salt, lemon often adds the extra something to make a dish complete. It transforms food from dull to bright and also helps cut through any fatty, rich flavor that may be overpowering on its own, which is one of the reasons it pairs so well with olive oil.

From sweet to savory, there are nearly countless ways to use lemons in everyday meals. Here are some of my favorites.

Lemon juice “the simple squeeze”

Adding a generous fresh squeeze of lemon right before serving a meal can be just the finishing touch it needs. Lemon juice can also be a great base for a light dressing, sauce, or marinade (the acid helps tenderize proteins) when combined with extra virgin olive oil and fresh or dried herbs.

Examples of when to reach for the lemon include adding to a brothy soup, any green vegetable, salad greens (lemon and arugula is one of our favorite combos), bean dishes including bean dips such as hummus, roasted potatoes, cooked fish, poultry, or even red meat, among many other everyday foods. Lemon juice can also be a great addition to a grain salad in combination with fresh herbs and atop the ever-popular avocado toast.

And when it comes to beverages, adding a squeeze of lemon to a green smoothie helps retain the bright green color and adds an extra pop of flavor. And of course, fresh lemon water is still a favorite of ours. Starting with one glass every morning, can be invigorating and also offer a healthy dose of vitamin C even before your first meal. (Just keep in mind, if sipping

lemon water all day everyday, it may cause some damage to tooth enamel because of its high acidity, but one glass in the morning won't cause any harm.) Pro tip: To get the most juice out of your lemons, gently roll them back and forth on your counter or cutting board before using. You can also try [microwaving lemons to extract even more juice](#)...seriously.

Lemon segments

Citrus segments are those pieces of fruit without any white pith or skin. Orange and grapefruit segments are often seen added to composed salads or open-faced toasts but this can be done with lemons too! To do this, cut each end off of the lemon, stand the lemon on one end and using a sharp paring knife, carefully remove all of the outer skin revealing the lemon pulp without any white pith. Then hold the lemon in your hand and gently slice around each lemon segment along the inner layers of skin, popping them out one by one. Adding a few lemon segments as desired in place of lemon juice can be a great way to incorporate acid into a dish without all of the extra liquid. Plus, you get the benefits of the fiber from the pulp.

Lemon zest

Lemon zest is where all of lemon's essential oils live—and those powerful health promoting flavonoids. Lemon zest offers all of the aroma from lemon, but without the intense acidity from the juice or bitterness of the pith. Used in combination with lemon juice or on its own, lemon zest can bridge the gap between sweet and savory. On the savory side, lemon zest is a great addition to grain salads, pasta dishes, vegetable sides, poultry- and seafood-based recipes, dips and sauces, and much more. On the sweeter side, lemon zest can add another element of flavor in dishes such as overnight oats, smoothie bowls, or fruit based desserts such as pies. The zest can either be finely grated or carefully sliced off in larger pieces and then finely chopped.

Whole lemon

To reap the most benefits of lemon, using it whole and consuming all parts of the lemon is ideal. While the white pith has a bitter flavor when raw, it

becomes more mellow when cooked. Throwing halved lemons on the grill, into a roasting pan, or directly into a pot of broth or soup as it cooks, are all great ways to enjoy whole cooked lemons—but one of the healthiest ways to consume whole lemon is in fermented form, also known as preserved lemon, which is very common in North African cuisines and other parts of the Mediterranean.

Preserved lemons are made by storing whole lemons with salt in sterile glass jars and allowing to ferment for several weeks. Recipes that include the ingredient often specify “chopped preserved lemon,” leaving many cooks uncertain as to which parts to use. (The rind, flesh, and even the juice from the jar are all edible and delicious!) But thanks to the company [New York Shuk](#), which specializes in Middle Eastern pantry staples, preserved lemons are now available as a blended paste which takes out the guesswork and provides all of the benefits of the whole lemon *plus* gut-healthy probiotics from the lacto-fermentation. I love this [preserved lemon paste](#) in nearly everything from salad dressings to dips to marinades and more.

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