

About Sweet Peppers

(taken from [World's Healthiest Foods](#))

Bell peppers belong to the nightshade (Solanaceae) family of plants, along with chili pepper, cayenne pepper, eggplant, tomatoes and potatoes (except sweet potatoes and yams).

While we are most accustomed to seeing green bell peppers in the supermarket, these delicious vegetables actually come in a wide variety of colors, including yellow, orange, red, purple, brown and black. The green bell peppers you purchase in the food market may actually be immature, non-ripe versions of these other color varieties. Not all bell peppers start off green, however, nor do green bell peppers always mature into other basic colors.

Paprika is a dried powdered form of bell pepper, and even though we are used to seeing red paprika in the spice section of the grocery, a paprika can be made from any color of bell pepper and it will end up being that same color once dried and ground into powder.

Bell peppers can be eaten at any stage of development. However, recent research has shown that the vitamin C and carotenoid content of bell peppers tends to increase while the pepper is reaching its optimal ripeness. Bell peppers are also typically more flavorful when optimally ripe.

What's New and Beneficial about Bell Peppers

- Bell pepper is not only an excellent source of carotenoids, but also a source of over 30 different members of the carotenoid nutrient family. A recent study from Spain took a close look vitamin C, vitamin E, and six of these carotenoids (alpha-carotene, beta-carotene, lycopene, lutein, cryptoxanthin and zeaxanthin) in all commonly eaten foods and found that only two vegetables contained at least two-thirds of all the listed nutrients. One of these foods was tomato, and the other was sweet bell pepper! Bell pepper alone provided 12% of the total zeaxanthin found in the participants' diets. (Bell pepper also provided 7% of the participants' total vitamin C intake.)
- If you want to maximize the availability of vitamin C and carotenoids from bell pepper, allow this amazing vegetable to ripen. Recent studies have shown that the vitamin C content and the carotenoid content of bell pepper both increase with ripening. When the vitamin C and carotenoid content of bell peppers increases, so



does their total antioxidant capacity, which can be a source of great health benefits. If harvested early in the ripening stage, bell peppers can still be allowed to ripen post-harvest and after you've purchased them and brought them home from the market. In one recent study, the vitamin C in not-fully-ripe bell peppers continued to increase during home storage over a period of about 10 days. It can, though, be difficult to tell whether a bell pepper is optimally ripe. Most--but not all--green bell peppers will turn red in color over time, but they may be optimally ripe before shifting over from green to red. A good rule of thumb is to judge less by their basic color and more by their color quality as well as overall texture and feel. Whether green, red, yellow, or orange, optimally ripe bell peppers will have deep, vivid colors, feel heavy for their size, and be firm enough to yield only slightly to pressure.

- Higher heat cooking can damage some of the delicate phytonutrients in bell peppers. In one recent study from Turkey, the effects of grilling on sweet green bell peppers were studied with respect to one particular phytonutrient--the flavonoid called luteolin. Prior to grilling, the bell peppers were found to contain about 46 milligrams/kilogram of this important antioxidant and anti-inflammatory flavonoid. After grilling for 7-8 minutes at a temperature of 150°C (302°F), about 40% of the luteolin was found to be destroyed. This loss of luteolin from higher heat cooking is one of the reasons we like cooking methods for bell peppers that use lower heat for a very short period of time.
- Although we tend to think about cruciferous vegetables like broccoli or allium vegetables like onions and garlic as vegetables that are richest in sulfur-containing compounds, bell peppers can also be valuable sources of health-supportive sulfur compounds. Several recent studies have taken a close look at the presence of enzymes in bell peppers called *cysteine S-conjugate beta-lyases* and their role in a sulfur-containing metabolic pathway called the thiomethyl shunt. These enzymes and this pathway may be involved in some of the anti-cancer benefits that bell pepper has shown in some animal and lab studies. They may serve as the basis for some of the anti-cancer benefits shown by green, yellow, red and orange vegetable intake in recent studies, including a recent study on risk reduction for gastric cancer and esophageal cancer.

Tips for Preparing Bell Peppers

Before coring and/or cutting the pepper, wash it under cold running water. If the pepper has been waxed, you should also scrub it gently but thoroughly with a natural bristle brush.

Use a paring knife to cut around the stem and then gently remove it. Peppers can be cut into various shapes and sizes. To easily chop, dice or cut the peppers into strips, first cut the pepper in half lengthwise, clean out the core and seeds, and then, after placing the skin side down on the cutting surface, cut into the desired size and shape. Peppers can also be cut horizontally into rings or left whole for stuffed peppers. The pulpy white inner cavity of the bell pepper is rich in flavonoids and can be eaten, even though some people have a personal preference for removing this section.

Healthiest Way of Cooking

Of all of the cooking methods we tried when cooking bell peppers, our favorite is Healthy Sauté. We think that it provides the greatest flavor and is also a method that allows for concentrated nutrient retention.

To Healthy Sauté bell peppers, heat 3 TBS of broth (vegetable or chicken) or water in a stainless steel skillet. Once bubbles begin to form add sliced red bell peppers, cover, and Healthy Sauté for 3 minutes on medium heat. After 3 minutes add 2 TBS broth, then cook uncovered on low heat for another 4 minutes, stirring constantly. Transfer to a bowl and toss with dressing.

A Few Quick Serving Ideas

- Add finely chopped bell peppers to tuna or chicken salad.
- After Healthy Sautéing chopped peppers, celery and onions, combine with tofu, chicken or seafood to make a simple Louisiana Creole dish.
- Purée roasted and peeled peppers with Healthy Sautéed onions and zucchini to make a deliciously refreshing soup that can be served hot or cold.
- Bell peppers are one of the best vegetables to serve in a crudité platter since not only do they add a brilliant splash of color, but their texture is also the perfect crunchy complement for dips.