I’m not sure when or how it all began, but I believe it is time for the harassment of the potato to stop. Potatoes have been made out to be one of the worst foods on the planet. They really don’t deserve this notoriety. Misinformation and misconceptions about potatoes abound. Even the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Services has fallen prey to this trend. If the proposed menu changes for the school lunch and breakfast program is approved, no more than one cup of starchy vegetables (including corn, green peas and white potatoes) will be allowed to be served each week. Now, I know all about the obesity epidemic. I want nutritious school foods served to our children. But cutting out potato is sending the wrong message. We’re allowing misinformation to be perpetuated.

One of the most common myths about potatoes is that they should be avoided because they are carbohydrates, which are evil because they cause weight gain. This just isn’t true. Despite what slick advertisers would like us to believe, carbohydrates do not cause weight gain, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, blood sugar spikes or insulin surges. Carbohydrates are the body’s primary fuel source, the fuel muscles prefer and the only fuel that our brains will use. If you’ve ever been on a very low-carbohydrate diet, you’ve probably found that by severely cutting down on carbohydrates your body starts to break down muscle and other protein-containing tissues in order to make carbohydrates.

Potatoes have been unfairly criticized for their ranking on the glycemic index, or GI. The glycemic index is not a property of a food but a measure of the metabolic response of an individual to a food. The GI of a food can vary depending on many factors. For example, the GI for potato varieties ranges from a low of 56 for a boiled Pontiac potato grown in Australia, to a high of 111 for a baked U.S. Russet Burbank. The GI can vary widely for the same variety of potato depending on where it is grown.

A number of factors can affect the glycemic index, including how a food is cooked, how well it’s chewed and the time of day it is eaten. There is so much variability in the GI that it just isn’t a reliable tool.

**The healthy potato**

An average potato, weighing about 5.3 ounces, with the skin contains:

- 110 calories
- 45 percent of the daily value for Vitamin C
- 620 mg of potassium, more than a banana
Peeling Away Potato Myths  By Georgia Clark

• Trace amounts of thiamin, riboflavin, folate, magnesium, phosphorous, iron and zinc
• No fat and no cholesterol and only minimal sodium
• 2 grams of dietary fiber, (in the skin)

The majority of nutrients in a potato are not found in the skin, as many believe, but in the potato itself. A potato is about 80 percent water and 20 percent solids. The chemical structure of a potato skin changes after it has been harvested. The outer layers thicken and harden. The potato belongs to the family Solanaceae, whose other members include the tomato, pepper, eggplant and petunia, as well as tobacco. The misnamed “sweet potato” belongs in the same family as the morning glory and is not a relative of the potato. When the Spanish brought sweet potatoes back from the West Indies, they called them by their native name, batatas. When white potatoes (papas) were introduced into Spain some years later, some people thought they were related. Soon papas were renamed patatas, but both were translated into the English potato.

Try this tasty papas dish at your next cookout.

Cookout Potatoes

Makes 6 to 8 servings

Nonstick cooking spray

1 medium onion, halved and thinly sliced

1 1/2 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, very thinly sliced

1 1/3 cups shredded low-fat sharp cheddar cheese

1/3 cup real bacon bits

1/3 cup chopped bell pepper, any color

1/2 teaspoon garlic salt

Spray a 9x9x2-inch foil pan liberally with nonstick cooking spray. Place half the onions, potatoes, cheese, bacon bits, bell pepper and garlic salt in pan. Repeat layers. Cover tightly with foil and grill over medium heat for one hour, rotating pan occasionally to avoid hot spots.

Nutritional information per serving: 140 calories, 2.5g fat, 1.5g saturated fat, 0g trans-fat, 10mg cholesterol, 370mg sodium, 720mg potassium, 20g carbohydrate, 0 fiber, 10g protein.

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