

The Ups and Downs of Drinking Smoothies

By Sandra J. Sarni, RD

Smoothies have become extremely popular lately and for many people serve as a meal replacement, especially for breakfast. What does the science tell us about how nutritious and filling they are?

As with all things in life there are pros and cons to drinking smoothies. Let's start with the negatives and finish up with the positives.

Research tells us that certain fruits when pureed in a blender are not only easily and quickly digested, they trigger a dip in your blood sugar. If this is pronounced, it can cause you to feel hungry, tired, nervous, and irritated- likely just the opposite of how you want to feel!

One such fruit is apples, thereby, not being the best choice of fruit to put in your smoothie. Some fruit juices or added sugars such as table sugar, honey, and other forms of sugar will act like apples and cause that same dip in your blood sugar. Another concern with smoothies is that the body and brain recognize calories from food as being more satisfying than calories coming from liquids. So, you may feel like you still want "something" to eat/drink even after having a smoothie. On a brighter note, research showed that slowing down the rate of drinking a smoothie did improve satiety (feelings of fullness) and sipping a smoothie over the course of 30 minutes could be as filling as eating the same amount of solid food.

Finally, your dentist might not approve of regular smoothie consumption. Evidence shows that drinking smoothies daily can erode teeth enamel. A solution is to sip through a straw for less acidic effect and do so slowly!

There are many benefits to drinking whole food, green smoothies. The primary one is increased intake of fruits and vegetables. Most Americans don't eat enough dark, leafy greens. Interestingly when greens are combined with whole fruits in smoothies the flavor of the greens is masked and people who otherwise wouldn't eat kale, spinach or Swiss chard think it's delicious! Research studies have shown that the whole fruits of choice in a smoothie are bananas, mangos, and berries. This is due to the phytochemicals contained in these fruits that actually slow sugar uptake into the bloodstream. Also, clinical studies of green and berry-based smoothies resulted in other health benefits.

The choice to add protein powder to a smoothie is an individual one and depends on one's health goals. If the smoothie is being used as a meal replacement, some protein powder can be beneficial. The choices are whey, soy, or plant-based proteins and are a matter of preference. Additionally, many people add ground flaxseed or chia seed to smoothies to increase fiber and omega-3 fatty acid intake ("good" types of fats).

Try These Recipes!

1. A recipe like the Mayo Clinic's Basic Green Smoothie Recipe (below) is packed with berries and greens and delivers the best of both worlds- maximum nutrient content and absorption without risking an abrupt rise in blood sugar. Enjoy!

Serves 4

Ingredients

- 1 banana
- 1/2 cup strawberries
- Juice of 1 lemon (about 4 tablespoons)
- 1/2 cup other berries such as blackberries or blueberries
- 2 ounces fresh raw baby spinach (about 2 cups)
- 1 tablespoon fresh mint or to taste
- 1 cup cold water or ice

Directions

Place all ingredients in a blender or juicer and puree.

Nutritional analysis per serving Serving size: 6 ounces

Total carbohydrate: 12 g

Dietary fiber: 2 g

Sodium: 14 mg

Saturated fat: trace

Total fat: trace

Trans fat: 0 g

Cholesterol: 0 mg

Protein: 1 g

Monounsaturated fat: trace

Calories: 52

Added sugars: 0 g

2. Protein-packed smoothies are your best option after exercise. They will also give you a boost of fluid and electrolytes such as potassium giving those muscles what they crave.

Peanut Butter Split Smoothie*

Serves 1

Ingredients:

- 1 ripe banana, quartered and frozen
- ½ cup of non-fat milk
- ¼ cup of plain, non-fat yogurt
- 1.5 tablespoons of creamy, natural peanut butter

Directions

Put all of the ingredients into a blender and blend until smooth.

*2006, Food Network, Ellie Krieger All Rights Reserved

Nutritional analysis per serving

Serving size: 1.5 cups

Calories: 325 calories

Total Fat: 12.5 grams

Saturated Fat: 1.5 grams

Cholesterol: 3 grams

Sodium: 90 milligrams

Carbohydrates: 43.5 grams

Dietary Fiber: 4.5 grams

Protein: 13.5 grams

