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Blueberry season is in full swing, and with several blueberry farms located right here in Alabama, now is the perfect time to stock up on this delicious and nutritious fruit.

What makes blueberries so healthy? They're full of antioxidants, flavonoids and other vitamins, which are involved in the prevention of cell damage.

"Antioxidants protect cells by stabilizing free radicals and can prevent some of the damage they cause," explains Laura Newton M.A.Ed., R.D., L.D., an associate professor in the Department of Nutrition Sciences at UAB.

Cellular damage is one of the factors in the development of cancer, leading many to believe that a healthy diet full of fruits and vegetables may help to reduce the risk of developing cancer. Cellular damage is caused by free radicals, atoms that contain an odd number of electrons and are highly reactive. "Some studies have shown that antioxidants may help prevent the free radical damage that is associated with cancer," explains Newton, a licensed dietician who often works with cancer patients.

Along with antioxidants, blueberries are full of vitamin C, which helps the immune system and can help the body to absorb iron. “Vitamin C also helps to keep blood vessels firm, offering protection from bruising,” adds Newton.

Consuming fresh, raw blueberries ensures the most nutritious benefits. “They can be frozen so stock-up when they are in season and store some in the freezer to enjoy year round,” explains Newton. “To freeze blueberries, put them in a single layer on a cookie sheet. Freeze them and then transfer to an airtight bag or container and store. Rinse them with water them prior to using.”Blueberry juice and other products may be nutritious, but be aware that they often contain less fiber than the whole fruit and sugar or corn syrup that may decrease their nutritional value.

The average serving size of blueberries is one-cup raw, which contains about 80 calories, and Newton says, "the latest guidelines are to make half your plate consist of fruits and vegetables. Getting a variety of fruits and vegetables insures you will get an array of antioxidant nutrients."

Blueberries and other nutrients-rich foods are continually being studied at places like the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center
where investigators are researching the link between cancer and nutrition.

Check out this recipe for a Healthified Blueberry-Lemon Tart , provided by UAB Eat Right .