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## How to Buy

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# Potatoes

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*Potatoes are one of the top 20 vegetables consumed in the United States. In fact, each American eats nearly 50 pounds of potatoes each year boiled, baked, roasted, fried, scalloped, creamed, stuffed, and even raw. The potato's versatility is limited only by the cook's imagination.*



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## Points to Consider

Wholesomeness...nutritive value...quality...informative labeling...and variety of uses are some of the points to consider when purchasing potatoes.

### Wholesomeness

Look for potatoes that are free from cuts and blemishes. You should avoid buying potatoes that have a green coloring to them. This "greening" is caused by exposure to natural or artificial light. Sometimes only the skin is affected, but greening may penetrate the flesh. The green portions contain the alkaloid solanin, which causes a bitter flavor and may have a poisonous effect when consumed in great quantities. Also avoid badly sprouted or shriveled potatoes.

Although most commercially marketed potatoes go through a wash process before moving to retail stores, you should wash them again before using, even if you are going to peel them.

### Nutritive Value

Potatoes are an important source of complex carbohydrates. In addition, they contain vitamins C and B<sub>6</sub>, iron, potassium, and trace minerals such as manganese, chromium, selenium, and phosphorus. Potatoes are low in sodium, are virtually fat free, and provide fiber when the skin is eaten. USDA nutritionists recommend 3 to 5 servings from the vegetable group each day. Count as a serving 1/2 cup cooked potato (baked, boiled, mashed). Go easy on the fat and salt added during cooking or at the table in the form of spreads, sauces, dressings, seasonings, and toppings.

### Quality

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"Differences in quality" refers to differences in appearance, amount of waste (from decay or defects), and price. The quality of potatoes is judged by external appearance.

To help assure quality in the potatoes you buy, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has established grade standards for potatoes.

## **USDA Grades for Potatoes**

The first U.S. quality standards for potatoes were developed in 1917 to help potato growers and shippers market their product in wholesale channels. At that time, most potatoes were sold in bulk. Since then, most potatoes have been marketed under the U.S. No. 1 grade.

The U.S. grade standards are periodically changed to keep up with changes in production, marketing practices, and consumer preferences.

Use of the USDA grade standards is voluntary, except where required by State law or other regulations. This grading service, operated jointly by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service and cooperating State agencies, offers official, impartial, third-party inspection of potatoes on a fee basis.

In establishing quality standards, USDA allows a small tolerance for defects because mechanical harvesting and packing practices cause a certain amount of unavoidable cuts, bruises, and other defects.

## **Sizes**

The U.S. No. 1 grade is the most commonly used grade, and it also has size designations which packers may use. If potatoes are labeled with these size designations, they must be within certain size ranges.

For example, you might see bags of U.S. No. 1 potatoes that are also labeled "Size A." This means that potatoes in the bag must be at least 1.87 inches in diameter, and 40 percent of the potatoes must be 2.5 inches in diameter or 6 ounces in weight, or larger.

If the size is not designated, the minimum size for U.S. No. 1 potatoes is 1.87 inches in diameter. There is no maximum size.

## **Labeling**

Under federal guidelines, a substantial number of retailers must provide nutrition information for the 20 most frequently eaten raw vegetables, including potatoes. The nutritional information may appear on posters, brochures, leaflets, or stickers near the potato display. It may include serving size; calories per serving; amount of protein, total carbohydrates, total fat, and sodium per serving; and percent of the U.S. Recommended Daily Allowances for iron, calcium, and vitamins A and C per serving.

Serving size is defined as that portion of food "customarily consumed per eating occasion." For raw vegetables, the serving size is often denoted by units (for example,

two stalks of celery or four carrot sticks), or a fraction of a unit (for example, one-sixth of a medium head of lettuce).

## **Growing and Marketing Potatoes**

Potatoes are produced in nearly every State, but about half of the commercial crop is grown in Idaho, Maine, California, and Washington.

Most of our year-round supply of fresh potatoes is harvested in September or October. These fall crops can be stored up to 9 months before shipment to retail outlets.

Potatoes are usually brushed or washed at the packinghouse. Dirty potatoes are unattractive, and the dirt itself adds to the weight of the consumer's purchase.

After cleaning, potatoes are mechanically sized and sorted into grades by packinghouse workers. Then, the potatoes are packed according to grade and size. The grade is often certified during packing by Federal-State inspectors.

Packing is largely mechanized. Bags are generally weighed after packing to ensure that they are slightly overweight, thus allowing for normal shrinkage in storage and marketing.

Fresh potatoes are typically marketed at retail stores in consumer unit packages, generally 5-, 10-, 15-, or 20-pound bags.

## **Varieties of Potatoes**

Varieties of potatoes are classified by their shape and skin color. Potatoes may be long or round, and their skins may be "white" (the regular white-to-buff color), red, or russet (normally having a brownish, rough, scaly, or netted skin).

The principal varieties are the Russet Burbank (long russet), the White Rose (long white), the Katahdin (round white), and the Red Pontiac (round red). Other varieties are available in different regions at specific times of the year; and some newer varieties such as the Norgold Russet (a long-to-blocky, lightly russeted potato) and the Norland (a round red) have become increasingly popular.

## **Selecting Potatoes**

As far as the consumer is concerned, potatoes can be classified by use. There are "new" potatoes, general purpose potatoes, and baking potatoes.

**"New" potatoes** are best when boiled. They are generally harvested before the skins have "set" and, because of immaturity, may be "skinned" or "feathered" during handling. Most new potatoes come to market from January through September. This term is also used to describe freshly dug fall-crop potatoes which are not quite fully matured.

**General-purpose potatoes**, both round and long types, comprise the great majority

of supplies. They are available year-round. As the term implies, they are used for boiling, frying, baking, casseroles, and soups.

**Baking potatoes** are grown specifically for their baking quality. The most widely grown and best known baking potato is the Russet Burbank.

## **Buying Tips**

Bags of potatoes packed for consumer purchase generally carry information about the contents, such as the type and origin of the potatoes, the grade, and the weight.

Potatoes in bags labeled U.S. No. 1 should be clean, firm, and have few defects. However, potatoes are also marketed loose or in bags without a USDA grade designation. Don't buy just because of low price. It doesn't pay to buy more potatoes than you can properly use or store without waste. Also, it's a waste of money to buy potatoes affected by decay. Even if you do trim off the decayed area, rapid deterioration is likely to spread to the salvaged area. Plus, you have no way of knowing from the outside how far the decay has spread on the inside.

## **Look For**

- Potatoes that are fairly clean, smooth, and firm.
- Potatoes that are free from large cuts, growth cracks, bruises, skinned areas, and decay. Some amount of skinning is normal in new potatoes.
- Potatoes of uniform size for even cooking. This is particularly important in baking or boiling potatoes whole.

## **Avoid**

- New potatoes with large skinned and discolored areas.
- Potatoes that are wrinkled, have wilted skins, or soft dark areas.
- Potatoes with a green coloring to their skins.
- Potatoes with second growth. These irregular, knob-shaped growths are considered defects because they are likely to cause waste.
- Potatoes that smell musty or moldy. This may affect the flavor or indicate decay.

It is impossible to detect internal defects without cutting the potato, but if you find that some of the potatoes you have bought are hollow in the center or have severe internal discoloration, take them back to your grocer for replacement.

## **Handling and Storage Tips**

Potatoes are nearly as delicate as apples. They can get bruised all the way from the digging machine in the field to your home storage bin. Handle them with care.

- If stored properly, general-purpose and baking potatoes will keep for several months; new potatoes will keep for several weeks.
- Look potatoes over before you store them. Set aside any that are bruised or

cracked, and use them first.

- Don't wash potatoes before you store them. As it does with most other fresh produce, dampness increases the likelihood of decay.
- Store potatoes in a cool (45 to 50 °F.), dark place, with good ventilation.
- Potatoes stored at 70 to 80 °F. should be used within a week. The higher temperature often causes sprouting and shriveling.
- Potatoes stored below 40 °F. for a week or more may develop a sweet taste. This is because some of the starch has changed to sugar. To improve their flavor, store them at a high temperature for 1 to 2 weeks before using them.

## Questions About Potatoes

**Q.** What causes internal defects?

**A.** One internal defect, hollow heart (an irregular hole at the center of the potato) is caused by excessively rapid growth. Another common internal defect is internal discoloration. Internal discoloration may be caused by improper field or storage conditions, freezing, or disease. Each causes a different type of discoloration. Do not use potatoes with severe internal discoloration.

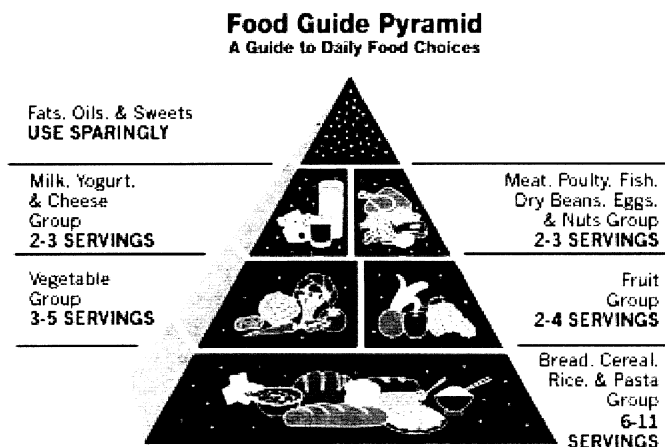
**Q.** What should I do if I find a rock in a bag of potatoes or find the potatoes to be of very poor quality?

**A.** Simply take the potatoes back to your grocer, who will generally replace your purchase.

## Preparing Potatoes for Cooking

- Gently scrub with a vegetable brush or cellulose sponge to clean.
- Leaving skin on potatoes during cooking is an excellent way to conserve nutrients.
- If potatoes are peeled before cooking, use a vegetable peeler to keep peelings as thin as possible, since some of the potato's nutrients are found close to the skin.
- Peeled potatoes turn dark if not cooked right away. To protect their whiteness, toss them with ascorbic acid or a little lemon juice.

For more information about nutrition, write:  
U.S. Department of Agriculture,  
Human Nutrition Information Service,  
6505 Belcrest Road,  
Hyattsville, MD 20782.



Use the Food Guide Pyramid to help you eat better every day...the Dietary Guidelines way. Start with plenty of Breads, Cereals, Rice, and Pasta; Vegetables; and Fruits. Add two to three servings from the Milk group and two to three servings from the Meat group. Each of these food groups provides some, but not all, of the nutrients you need. No one food group is more important than another - for good health you need them all. Go easy on the fats, oils, and sweets, the foods in the small tip of the Pyramid.

## HOW TO BUY POTATOES

### Buy the Type You Need

There are three types:

- "new" potatoes (for boiling)
- general-purposes potatoes
- baking potatoes

### Check the Quality

- Look for potatoes that are firm, well-shaped, smooth (with small eyes), and free from large cuts and bruises.
- Avoid potatoes that are green or badly sprouted or shriveled.

### Look for the U.S. Grade Name

- U.S. No. 1 potatoes are good quality and are the grade most commonly seen in consumer packages.
- If potatoes are packed under continuous USDA inspection, the grade name may appear within the official shield.

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