Superfoods Fact Sheet
Acerola Cherry
(Malpighia emarginata)

Parts used: Fruit

The acerola cherry is from a different species to traditional cherries and is also called the West Indian cherry or myrtle, or the Barbados Cherry. It requires a tropical or sub-tropical climate to thrive. It comes from an evergreen shrub or small tree which thrives in tropical South America, Central America, California, Texas and Florida, and bear a delicious cherry-like fruit.

They do not keep well once picked, deteriorating noticeably with 4 hours, and becoming unusable within 3 – 5 days, so they have to be processed quickly. They can be frozen but tend to fall apart as they thaw. They have a distinct flavour and either frozen or as a concentrate are used in a wide variety of foods, and even certain alcoholic beverages.

They have an exceptionally high Vitamin C content and much of their benefit revolves around this.

Historic and Traditional Uses

Thought to be native to the Yucatan, from where it spread into the wilds of Central and South America, for hundreds of years acerola cherries have been used in Latin America and the Amazon as a remarkable medicinal plant. Its cultivation eventually spread throughout the Caribbean and temperate regions due to its usefulness. The plant was initially introduced into the United States from Cuba in the late 1800s.

Interest in the fruit exploded with research conducted in the 1940 outlining its high Vitamin C content, and it is around this that most of its alternative health benefits are based.

It is used as a preventative for colds, coughs, infections, hair loss and dental problems. It has also been used as an effective remedy for diarrhea, as well as a tonic for the immune system.

Health Benefits

Health benefits claimed for these little fruits include:

- Diabetes management
- Cancer prevention
- Anti-ageing
- Immune booster
- Regulate metabolism
- Heart health
- Improving digestive health
However, it has been recognised that an excessive intake of acerola cherries can cause diarrhea, sleeplessness, general upset and insomnia, so don’t overdo it!

Research into these berries is in its infancy, so there is very little direct research to refer to, but much can be derived from other studies already done around compounds found in these berries.

**Cardiovascular and Heart Health**

A number of benefits have been linked with antioxidant activity and anthocyanins relating to a decrease in the primary risk factors for heart disease. As acerola cherries score highly here it can be assumed that these same benefits apply. In addition, the high levels of Vitamin C in acerola cherries means that the ‘low level scurvy’ theory of atherosclerosis, as posited by the Linus Pauling Institute, and being researched successfully by others, demonstrates clearly how acerola cherries can help to clear plaques from arteries.

**Inflammation**

Both the vitamin C and antioxidant phyto chemicals in the acerola cherry will help to rid the body of harmful oxygen-derived free radicals. These are recognised as underpinning many inflammatory conditions within the body, and will therefore contribute to not just improving these conditions, but helping to prevent them in the first place.

Researchers at John Hopkins Hospital found that the phytochemicals in acerola cherries help to suppress the pain caused by inflammation, and are therefore potentially helpful with inflammatory conditions.

**Blood Sugar**

In an animal study acerola extract was shown to help with blood sugar issues, leading scientists to draw the conclusion that acerola cherries may help reduce blood sugar levels. Studies suggest it may be the chlorogenic acid in these berries which help to reduce blood sugar levels, thus helping with diabetes type II.

**Cancer**

As with many antioxidant rich foods some research is being carried out with regards to benefits for improving or preventing cancer. So far animal studies have shown that acerola extract helped to regulate abnormal cell growth, slowing the spread of lung cancer. The role ellagic acid in counteracting carcinogens may have a role to play here.

**Other Benefits**

Preliminary research suggests that acerola extract may help to shield the skin from the harmful effects of sun exposure. A topically applied gel derived from acerola is also said to improve skin tone and help to heal sun-damaged skin, although this is not yet supported by research. Given the part that Vitamin C plays in the formation of collagen, and its importance in the healing process, research into this would be interesting.

USDA researchers at Tufts University have also looked at the role anthocyanins play in protecting brain neurons from the effects of antioxidant damage, which can potentially lead to memory loss, dementia and even

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Alzheimers disease. So far research has been promising in showing the ability of cherry anthocyanins to help reduce the risk of these diseases.

**Nutrients:**

The benefits of acerola cherries derive from their high nutrient content, in particular Vitamin C – they are said to contain between 32 and 65 times more vitamin C than oranges, making them one of the richest sources of Vitamin C! They also contain high levels of Vitamin A as well as the B vitamin folic acid, magnesium, potassium and Vitamin B5. Levels of Vitamin A often rival that of carrots, one of the best sources for Vitamin A.

Acerola cherries also provide significant amounts of iron to the body, providing 15% of the RDA for males.

In addition to these essential vitamins and minerals acerola cherries also contain health-promoting phytonutrients such as flavonoids and anthocyanins. Anthocyanins have been the subject of much research by the medical community due to their health-giving benefits.

Acerola cherries include the poly-phenolic anthocyanin compounds:

- Cyanidin
- Chlorogenic acid
- Ferulic acid
- Tannins
- Quercetin
- Kaempferol
- Delphinidins
- Peonidins
- Pelargonidins
- Petunidin
- Malvidin

This combination of phytonutrients and Vitamin C ensure that acerola cherries have a high antioxidant activity. Of 14 Amazonian/Latin American berries tested acerola cherries scored the highest. There is also a suggestion that, consumed alongside other antioxidant nutrients, acerola cherries will improve overall antioxidant capacity.\(^5\)

Recent discoveries have also shown that the cherries contain a phytocompound called ellagic acid, which is important as it counteracts both synthetic and naturally occurring carcinogens, thus preventing cancerous conditions occurring.

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<th>Per 100 mg</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcium</td>
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<td>Iron</td>
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<td>Magnesium</td>
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<td>Phosphorus</td>
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<td>Potassium</td>
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<td>Sodium</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nutrient</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zinc</td>
<td>0.10 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vitamin C</td>
<td>1677.6 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>0.020 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>0.060 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>0.400 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>B6</td>
<td>0.009 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Folic acid</td>
<td>400 µg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vitamin A</td>
<td>767 iu</td>
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Source: USDA National Nutrient Database