Is Popcorn Easy or Hard to Digest?

By Allison Forsyth • Updated Dec 12, 2022 • Medically Reviewed by Jennifer Logan, MD, MPH

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Popcorn is a nutritious, easy-to-digest food with plenty of fiber.
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After eating any food, your digestive system turns it into nutrients to be used throughout your entire body. Then, it passes the rest. While some foods are easy to digest, others are a little more difficult.

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One food that tends to raise questions is popcorn. Is it good or bad for your digestive system?

Popcorn (both popped and un-popped) is a whole grain with a lot of vitamins, nutrients and fiber. While a great snack, its high fiber content can be a problem for those with underlying digestive issues. Not to mention when you throw butter, oil, salt and other toppings on it — delicious, but not as nutritious.

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Here, learn the benefits and downsides of eating this classic movie theater snack, and whether it's easy or hard to digest.

How Digestible Is Popcorn?

The short answer: It's easy to digest.

Popcorn is known for its ability to pass easily through the gut, whether in whole kernel or popped form. Corn kernels are actually seeds with tough outer shells, which means they may not fully break down in your digestive system, per the Cleveland Clinic.

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You may occasionally see some whole kernels or kernel pieces in your stool, but popcorn should not cause blood in the stool.

You may also think you need to chew popcorn thoroughly in order to reap all its nutrients, but this is false, according to the University of Utah. Yes, a little chewing can help your stomach along, but you're not going to gain more nutrients from food if you spend more time chewing it. (That's your stomach's job!)

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What Happens if You Swallow a Popcorn Kernel Whole?

We know this can happen by accident from time to time, especially when you're engrossed in a thrilling movie. Whole un-popped kernels will pass through the digestive tract without breaking down. That means you may see whole kernels in your poop later that day.

While it's not dangerous to accidentally swallow a few, you shouldn't purposely swallow or chew un-popped kernels, as the crunching can damage your teeth. If swallowed, large amounts could also build up in your intestines and form a mass called a "bezoar," which would require medical treatment to remove, according to the Mayo Clinic.

The Benefits of Eating Popcorn

Despite the bad reputation movie theater popcorn gets as an "unhealthy food," popcorn itself is actually a nutritious choice. Here's a breakdown of some of the benefits.

Good Source of Minerals

As mentioned before, popcorn has essential nutrients like magnesium, phosphorus and folate — all of which are needed to develop strong bones, prevent muscle aches and spasms and repair tissues, per Mount Sinai.

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Folate (a B vitamin) is an especially important nutrient for people who are pregnant.

Good Source of Fiber

High-fiber foods, such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains (including popcorn), can provide both soluble and insoluble fiber. Both are important for gut health.

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Popcorn has about 4 grams of fiber in a 3-cup serving, most of which is insoluble fiber — the type that is never fully digested. Instead, it draws water to the bowels, bulking up your stool and allowing it to pass quickly, according to the National Library of Medicine.

That means if you're struggling to "go," eating popcorn could help.

What's more, eating fiber is associated with a reduced risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and hypertension, according to the American College of Cardiology. Fiber can also lower cholesterol and stabilize blood sugar levels, per Harvard Health Publishing.

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Tip

Aim to eat 3 to 4 ounces of whole grains or high-fiber foods each day. (The recommended daily amount of fiber is between 25 and 38 grams, per the Mayo Clinic.) If you're not used to a lot of fiber, gradually increase the amount you eat over a few weeks to prevent negative side effects like gas and constipation.

It's a Low-Calorie Food

Popcorn is a low-calorie food, meaning it's a good snack choice if you are trying to lose weight. And because of its fiber content, it can make you feel fuller for longer, helping you stay satiated between meals.

Air-Popped Popcorn Nutrition Facts (Per 3-Cup Serving)

Calories	Approx. 100
Carbohydrates	18 g
Fiber	3 g
Fat	1 g
Protein	3 g

Source(s): USDA

Of course, these nutrition facts will change if you add butter, salt, oil or other toppings to your popcorn. If you are making it yourself at home, try to use olive oil for healthy fats and add sea salt sparingly.

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How Long Does Popcorn Take to Digest?

Popcorn may take longer to digest than other foods because it's a complex carbohydrate and high in fiber. Simple carbs (like sugar, pasta and white bread) are quick to digest while complex carbs pass a little more slowly.

In general, food can stay in your stomach between 40 and 120 minutes (or more) and another 40 to 120 minutes in the small intestine, per the Cleveland Clinic. This means it could take several hours for popcorn to get to your large intestine. It generally takes about 18 to 24 hours for food to be removed as stool.

Is Popcorn Bad for Your Digestive System?

Even though it's a nutritious, low-calorie and low-FODMAP food (which might make it helpful for people with certain digestive conditions, according to the Cleveland Clinic), people with the below conditions may want to avoid popcorn.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

If you have an inflammatory bowel disease (with symptoms like pain, bloating, diarrhea and constipation), popcorn and other types of fiber may worsen your symptoms, although not everyone experiences this effect.

Conditions like Crohn's disease, for example, worsen when you eat too much fiber. Eating popcorn could worsen symptoms like the following, per the Mayo Clinic:

- Diarrhea
- Blood in the stool
- Ulcers in the intestines
- Decreased appetite
- Abdominal cramping and pain

Diarrhea

If you are dealing with a bout of diarrhea, popcorn is a food you'll want to avoid.

Popcorn will only increase the number of times you poop (not exactly what you want when you're already going more than usual).

It's wise to also avoid beans, nuts, fruits and other high-fiber foods like raw vegetables and bran until your diarrhea goes away.

What About Diverticulitis?

Your risk of developing diverticula, or small, bulging pouches inside the intestines, increases 50 percent by age 60, according to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. This is a condition called diverticulosis.

When these pouches become inflamed, you can develop a condition called diverticulitis, which requires medical treatment.

At one time, experts thought popcorn (along with nuts and seeds) caused inflammation and worsened diverticulitis by getting stuck in the diverticula. But new research has proven this false, per the Mayo Clinic.

In fact, a March 2021 review in *Nutrients* found a high intake of fiber was associated with a *decreased risk* of diverticulitis.

The Bottom Line

Popcorn can be a great food for your digestive system due to its high fiber content.

The only time it may cause trouble is if you have an underlying digestive condition. In this case, talk to your doctor to get a proper diagnosis and treatment recommendations — and snack ideas!

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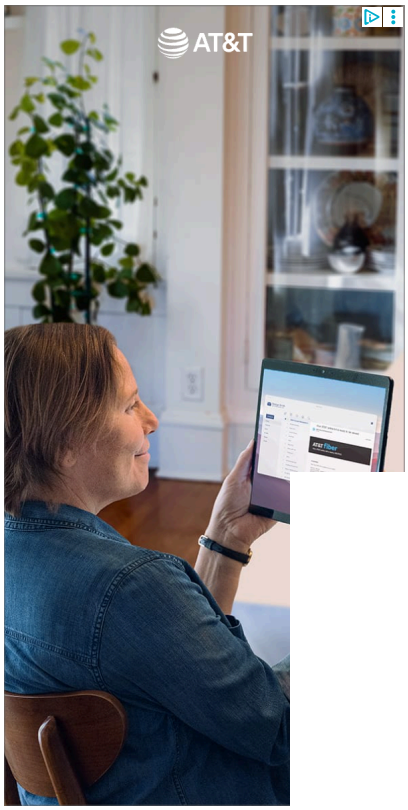
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