

pumpkin seeds and okra for lunch

Categories : [Health talks with Dr Chireka](#)

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Pumpkin seeds (mhodzi dzemanhanga) and Okra (derere) for lunch !

By Dr Brighton Chireka

"Today Okra and yesterday it was pumpkin seeds this is not fair ", says me some years ago when I was a kid. I remember coming from Chindotwe Primary School in Musana area near Shamva in Zimbabwe one afternoon and finding my mother having prepared sadza (thick maize porridge) with okra(derere). The previous day it was sadza and roasted pumpkin seeds. I was doing my primary education in Musana rural area and each time I came home there was a lot of food for me to eat. My father used to joke saying that our home was a "mandodya zvipi farm" (what can I eat farm) because there was variety of food available . The variety did not impress me as I had mine which did not include okra or pumpkin seeds.

As a kid I had foods that I wanted but my parents would not allow me to eat them. I was not allowed to eat potato crisps, sweets , chocolates or fizzy drinks. I thought my parents were cruel as they prohibited me from eating those foods and advised me to drink plenty of water or diluted orange juice popularly known as "Mazowe". Now this afternoon in discussion, I was shocked when after having roasted pumpkin seeds the previous day , I was now faced with sadza and okra.I was not amused by that as I wanted meat. However I remember enjoying the okra and roasted pumpkin seeds even if it was not my first choice. My mum told me that okra and pumpkin seeds were good for my health . I just said to myself , "oh that's what all mums say when they want you to eat the food they would have prepared".

I later on found myself liking okra and pumpkin seeds as a teenager but when I grew up and moved out of my parent's house I started to eat anything forgetting the nutritional lessons that my mum had given me. I never took my mum's 5 minutes lessons on food seriously as to me she "knew nothing " as she was not a medical doctor. Now that I am a medical doctor and have made a research into these foods that my mum was persuading me to eat has made me to change my mind. I have found that pumpkins seeds and okra are highly recommended to be part of our diet .

Let's look at pumpkin seeds first;

Pumpkin seeds can clear parasites from the tummy such as tapeworms . These parasites can damage our intestines and prevent us from absorbing the nutrients we want from the food we eat. Amazingly pumpkin seeds can clear these worms from our bowels within a short time . No wonder why my mum kept persuading me to eat these seeds.

Pumpkin seeds are high in Zinc. Zinc is needed to maintain bones, skin, and nails . It is needed to support our immune system and reduce inflammation. Zinc also regulates carbohydrate and protein metabolism as well regulating hormones and balancing glucose levels . If one lacks Zinc they will feel weak , low mood and gets prone to simple infections and can get brittle bone disease - osteoporosis.

Pumpkin seeds contain magnesium:

Magnesium improves the motility of the gastrointestinal tract and colon thereby promoting the elimination of toxins and impurities.

Pumpkin Seeds Promote Heart Health

Different pumpkin seed varieties have a range of health benefits associated with a decreased risk of developing cardiovascular problems. Pumpkin seeds contain nutritional sources of antioxidants and healthy fats which do not only promote digestion, but also improve heart health by cleansing toxic waste that has accumulated in the cardiovascular system.

Pumpkin seeds are a powerhouse source of antioxidants known as phenolic compounds which support heart health and prevent disease. Studies indicate that the common antioxidant which gives fruit and vegetables an orange color, carotenoids, are found in large quantities within pumpkin seeds

In fact, the World Health Organization lists pumpkin seeds as a phytochemical-dense food source because of its high phytosterol content which may improve cholesterol levels . Pumpkin seeds are a source of a healthy fat known as alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). ALA is an essential fatty acid which must be absorbed into the body from food. ALA is also beneficial in recycling antioxidants in the body such as vitamin C, vitamin E and various enzymes for use.

Pumpkin Seeds Improve Blood Sugar

Poor blood sugar control can be a result of increased refined carbohydrates and sugar. Lifestyle changes such as adding pumpkin seeds to our diets may not only help lower blood sugar levels but also reduce inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract and manage cravings. Pumpkin seeds are suggested to regulate glucose metabolism and prevent against high sugar in our blood.

Let's look at Okra now;

Okra is rich in dietary fibre and this help to stabilise the blood glucose by slowing the rate at which sugar is absorbed from the intestinal tract . This is very important in people who are diabetic as it helps to control their blood sugar without the need for medication. Obviously this includes lifestyle changes that focuses of health diet and regular exercise as well as maintaining a healthy weight . Other health benefits of Okra

These include:

Preventing and improving constipation

Lowering cholesterol

Reducing the risk of some forms of cancer, especially colorectal cancer

Improving energy levels and improving symptoms of depression

Helping to treat sore throat, irritable bowel, ulcers and lung inflammation

We can see from the above information that our elders had lots of knowledge about the diet they wanted us to follow. Let's go to the basics and include okra and pumpkins in our diet. We can either have the seeds as roasted or even to grind them into a powder. We do have good websites that have our Zimbabwean recipes which include okra and pumpkin seeds so try some and you will enjoy the food as well as help to improve your health. Okra and pumpkin seeds are available in Zimbabwe, South Africa , United Kingdom so no excuse for not including them in your diet.

This article was compiled by **Dr Brighton Chireka** who is a GP and a Patient Engagement Advocate (PEA) in Folkestone Kent in UK. You can contact him on **info@docbeecee.co.uk**

Disclaimer: This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. Dr Chireka has used all reasonable care in compiling the information but make no warranty as to its accuracy. Consult a doctor or other health care professional for diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions. He would like to thank Dr Jocker for information on pumpkin seeds and diabetes uk for information on okra.