Kale: Health Benefits and Recipes

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When it comes to nutrient-dense vegetables, kale is king. This cruciferous powerhouse is in the same vegetable family as broccoli, arugula, radish, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, mustard greens, radish, turnip and bok choy. It is a rich source of vitamins and minerals. And, the good news is, it’s easy to find. Even during this time of grocery store shortages, most of us are still able to find fresh or pre-chopped kale in the produce section.

Kale is rich in vitamin C, which is important for a well-functioning immune system. Clinical trials have found that vitamin C shortens the frequency, duration and severity of the common cold and the incidence of pneumonia. Vitamin C is also necessary to make collagen, which is an abundant structural protein in the body. While most experts recommend daily doses ranging from 500 mg to 3,000 mg, it is possible to get vitamin C from real food sources, as well. Kale is much higher in vitamin C then most vegetables, and one cup of raw kale actually contains more vitamin C than a whole orange.

Kale is also one of the best sources of vitamin K1, a fat-soluble vitamin that plays a key role in blood clotting. Kale also contains zeaxanthin and lutein, two important antioxidants that give kale its dark green color. These nutrients have been shown to help improve eyesight, and also help prevent macular degeneration and cataracts.

You can capitalize on these health benefits by adding some kale to your meal plan this week. Below are a few simple and tasty recipes to get you started.

**Peachy Kale Smoothie**

*(Note: Kale can be chopped and kept in the freezer or purchased frozen to add to smoothies)*

Ingredients:

1 cup kale leaves

1/2 cup diced peaches

1/2 cup frozen strawberries

1/2 cup frozen pineapple

1 cup canned coconut milk or water

Directions:

In a high-speed blender add kale, peaches, strawberries, pineapple, and coconut milk and puree on high. Enjoy immediately.

**Baked Sweet Potato with Kale and Feta**

Ingredients:

Sweet potatoes

Chopped kale

Olive oil

Salt and pepper

Feta cheese

Chopped walnuts

Directions:

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees Fahrenheit. Bake sweet potatoes for 45 minutes to an hour, until tender when pierced with a fork. While the potatoes are baking, toss some chopped kale in olive oil, salt and pepper over medium heat in a skillet. Sauté kale until slightly wilted, about 3-5 minutes. Slice sweet potatoes in half lengthwise, add kale, feta and walnuts, return to the oven for 10 minutes to melt the feta.

**Kale Chips**

*(The best kale chips are made in the dehydrator, but as most people have easy access to an oven, this recipe provides an alternative preparation method.)*

Preheat the oven to 275 degrees Fahrenheit. Line a cookie sheet with parchment paper. In a large bowl, massage the dressing of your choice into one bunch of curly kale that has been washed, dried, and chopped with ribs removed. Spread the kale evenly on the cookie sheet, making sure leaves do not overlap. Bake for 15 minutes, but keep a close eye on it. There is a fine line between crispy and burnt!

**Lemon and Garlic Sautéed Kale**

Ingredients:

2 large bunches of kale, any variety
2 tablespoons olive oil
3 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
½ teaspoon sea salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
Juice of one small lemon
Pinch of red pepper flakes (optional for added flavor and spice)

Directions:
Pull the kale leaves from their stems and coarsely chop the leaves. Rinse the leaves, but do not dry them. Heat 2 tablespoons of oil in a large, wide, high-sided sauté pan over medium heat until hot. Add the garlic and red pepper flakes and cook, stirring until fragrant (usually about 1 minute, do not let the garlic brown). Add the kale, a few handfuls at a time, stirring after each handful you add so it starts to wilt. Add in the salt and pepper, cover and continue to cook about 5 minutes. Stir occasionally until the kale is tender. Remove from heat, stir in the lemon juice and serve. Leftovers can be stored in airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 5 days. This is excellent added to an egg scramble the next morning!