

Healthy Chips for Smart Snacking
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For Print April 20, 2011

It is all about the crunch. Yes, everyone enjoys snacking, and the crunch of chips satisfies much better than, say, a plate of steamed vegetables. Yet we all agree that most crunchy snacks come loaded with unhealthy oils, sugars and other additives. The time has come to break out the dehydrator and take charge of snack-time with healthy, crunchy alternatives to bagged chips.

Almost any fruit or vegetable dries easily to provide a great snack. The keys to successful dehydrating lie in proper preparation, correct drying time and temperature and air control. Food can be dried in a dehydrator or in an oven. The best dehydrators have a thermostat to control heat and a fan to provide for proper air flow. Some dehydrators have the heating element at the bottom of a stack of trays. These can be used if care is taken to rotate the trays during drying to avoid having the food on the trays closest to the heat source dry faster than the rest of the batch.

If the drying will be done in an electric or gas oven, the Colorado State University Cooperative Extension recommends “... preheat oven at lowest setting (140 to 150 degrees F), then adjust the thermostat and prop the oven door open to achieve a consistent oven temperature of 140 degrees F, and to allow moist air to escape. ... To ensure maintenance of 140 to 150 degrees F, monitor oven temperature using a calibrated oven thermometer. ...and check it every two hours throughout drying.” Remember to leave 2½ inches between trays and to rotate these every half hour for oven drying.

Some fruits and many vegetables must be blanched before dehydrating to be sure to get a quality product. However, one favorite, zucchini chips, requires no blanching and can be a great way to preserve summer bounty. Simply slice clean zucchini into rounds and place on the dehydrating trays. Various spices and salts may be added, and garlic salt produces a great chip. Be careful not to slice the zucchini too thin, as dehydrating removes the moisture from the vegetable and you may end up with zucchini “paper” instead of chips! The Excalibur Dehydrator dehydration guide recommends slicing zucchini into ¼ or 1/8 inch slices before dehydrating for 7-11 hours at 125°.

For potato chips, the Excalibur guide advises steaming washed and peeled new potatoes for 4-6 minutes before cutting French style or slicing into ¼ or 1/8 inch slices. If preferred, the potatoes may be grated. The drying time for potatoes to become brittle or leathery will be 6-14 hours at 125°.

Enjoy snacking on wholesome, healthy chips without added fats or “mystery” ingredients. For more dehydrating tips, or to ask questions about dehydrating or any other food preservation method, call the Master Food Preservers and leave a message at (530) 621-5506. A Master Food Preserver will return the call.

The Master Food Preservers are also available free of charge to speak to organizations and clubs about food safety or food preservation topics. Just call the number above to arrange for a speaker for small or large groups. For more information about the public education classes and activities, including the free public classes on food safety and pressure canning, be sure to go to the Master Food Preserver website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Food_Preservers/.