

Cherries blossom

Reap the antioxidant and sleep-promoting benefits of these red fruit

Cherries have anti-inflammatory compounds that can soothe arthritis and gout, and new research suggests they may also be the answer to a good night's sleep. Sour cherries are one of the few foods known to have naturally occurring melatonin, the chemical that regulates the body's circadian rhythm and sleep patterns.

"Very few foods have been tested for melatonin content," says Dr Russell Reiter, a melatonin expert and professor of neuroendocrinology at the University of Texas Health Science Centre. "But we know tart (sour) cherries have substantial amounts. They are on the high end of the scale."

For a late-night snack, try cherry jam on toast. Research suggests melatonin works best when consumed in the hour before bedtime.

A fresh take

Trevor Ranford, executive officer of the Cherry Growers of Australia, says fresh cherries keep best when:

1. Refrigerated at 0-4C. "Cherries lose more quality in one hour at 30C than in 24 hours at 0C."
2. Loosely packed in a covered container to avoid bruising.
3. Kept dry. "Cherries absorb water and will soften if sprinkled, so wash them just before eating."
4. Stems are left on. "This helps keep the cherries fresh."

Cherry ripe

Cherry-picking season begins in December and runs until the end of January. Ellisfield Farm, in the Mornington Peninsula hinterland, is Australia's largest grower of sour Morello cherries, which are popular in jams, pies, cakes and liqueurs.

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