



Health benefits of black jack

By: **Asunta Simoloka and Prof Rashid Bhikha**

July 2016

Black jack vegetable is known botanically as *bidens pilosa* and in South Africa local names include muxiji and gewone knapseherel. Like many indigenous African vegetables, black jack has an impressive nutritional profile that comes with a very wide variety of benefits.

Diabetes

Black jack is a great choice for the prevention and treatment of diabetes due to the presence of various nutrients. Firstly, black jack is rich in fiber, a nutrient that makes insulin efficient at controlling blood sugar. Insulin is a hormone that moves sugar from the blood stream into body cells where it can be utilized. Black jack also has plenty of antioxidants and they too are involved in regulating blood sugar. Antioxidants improve the body's ability to control blood sugar, so the higher the amount of antioxidants in the body the greater the body's capacity to keep blood sugar under control. Studies show that people whose diets are rich in antioxidants have a dramatically lower incidence of diabetes.

Cardiovascular health

Black jack is greatly beneficial to the cardiovascular system which relates to the heart and blood vessels. The fiber abundantly present in black jack tremendously boosts heart health. Many studies show that the rate of heart disease is very low among populations that follow fiber-rich diets, like the rural African diet. Lack of fiber in modern diets has also been blamed for the high rates of heart disease among people following westernized diets. Fiber is known to lower bad cholesterol while also increasing good cholesterol and this kind of cholesterol balance prevents plaque buildup in blood vessels thereby significantly cutting the risk of heart attack and stroke as well as promoting heart health in general. What's more, fiber provided by black jack minimizes belly fat, the most dangerous form of fat to carry. Belly fat, also referred to as visceral fat, surrounds vital organs like the heart and liver. This situation dramatically increases the risk of heart disease, heart attack, stroke, diabetes, cancer, and other chronic diseases. By keeping belly fat away, black jack tremendously promotes general cardiovascular health.

The antioxidants in black jack also help keep the cardiovascular system in good health. Studies continue to show a strong relationship between diets rich in antioxidants and very low rates of cardiovascular diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, cholesterol abnormalities, and stroke. Other unprocessed plant foods also provide plenty of antioxidants.

Improved cardiovascular wellbeing from eating black jack is a huge advantage for people with diabetes because diabetes has a very adverse impact on the cardiovascular system. By eating black jack and other unprocessed plant foods, people with diabetes are able to avert serious health complications relating to cardiovascular health.

Healthy digestion

Black jack, due to its abundance of fiber, promotes healthy digestion. Fiber is known to improve bowel regularity as well as preventing and easing constipation. Exposure to fiber stimulates digestive muscle movements and generally improves the way these muscles work thus preventing acid reflux, bloating, and many other digest disorders. When digestive disorders go on for a long time, the risk of more serious problems like esophageal cancer and stomach cancer goes up.

Another way fiber promotes digestion is by minimizing the growth of colon polyps. These are abnormal growths on the inside of the colon and they may turn cancerous if not dealt with. This partly explains why colon cancer is very rare among people who eat lots of fiber-rich foods. Other ways fiber in black jack promotes healthy digestion include warding off piles or hemorrhoids and acting as a prebiotic by creating a suitable environment for proper multiplication and function of healthy gut bacteria. These bacteria are essential for healthy digestion and overall wellbeing.

Cancer

Black jack has powerful anti-cancer features too. Again, fiber takes on a leading role in countering cancer by preventing insulin resistance, a condition found to increase the risk of cancer especially hormone-related cancer like breast and prostate cancer. Insulin resistance happens when the ability of insulin to control blood sugar is impaired.

The high content of antioxidants in black jack is another reason this vegetable is a powerful anti-cancer weapon. Antioxidants protect cells against damage from harmful cancer causing radicals. By controlling damage to cells, antioxidants are able to also minimize systemic inflammation and this refers to heating,

redness, and swelling in different body locations in response to cell damage. Continuous inflammation is a huge concern because it tremendously adds to cancer risk.

Besides preventing cancer, antioxidants in black jack are powerful enough to stop cancer growth and kill cancer cells. The antioxidants and different nutrients in black jack are actually toxic to cancer. Different studies indicate that antioxidants disrupt the cycle of cancer cells and this proves to be vital for weakening cancer. Black jack has a collection of various anti oxidants and the major ones include beta carotene, vitamin C, and vitamin E. Besides conducting antioxidant activities, these nutrients keep the immune system very strong, allowing the body to quickly detect and destroy cancer cells.

With such a potent anti-cancer profile black jack is an excellent food choice for the prevention and treatment of breast, prostate, colon, and any type of cancer. High rates of cancer can be directly connected to unhealthy diets lacking in vegetables like black jack.

Multiple benefits

There are so many more benefits associated with black jack. The anti-inflammatory powers of this vegetable also offer protection against cognitive decline. This means that eating black jack can prevent memory loss related to age and chronic diseases such as diabetes. Anti-inflammatory properties also significantly cut the likelihood of autoimmune conditions like type1 diabetes and lupus. Plus, antioxidants in black jack slow down aging and are able to reduce appearance of wrinkles. Black jack is also believed to fight off bacterial and fungal infections.

Black jack is a highly nutritious vegetable with benefits that are too many to list. In some places, black jack leaves are used for making herbal tea. And since black jack has fat soluble nutrients like beta carotene and vitamin E, this vegetable should be eaten along with a healthy fat-containing food in order to improve nutrient absorption. Monounsaturated fat-rich groundnuts are a great example.

Further reading

avrdc.org/blackjack-bidens-pilosa/

www.islandherbsandspices.com/spanish-needle-bidens-pilosa/

www.hindawi.com/journals/ecam/2013/340215/