

NUTRIGRAM

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Some Like It Hot

Did you ever wonder what makes spicy food so hot? In the case of chile peppers, it is a compound called capsaicin. Capsaicin is produced by the chile pepper plant (possibly as a deterrent to animals considering eating them) and is responsible for the burning sensation we feel when we eat spicy peppers. Chile peppers, or the capsaicin from them, are used in a variety of foods to provide extra flavor. Spicy dishes play a major role in a variety of cultures including Indonesian, Szechuan, Mexican, Indian and Native American cuisines. In addition to the spicy kick that chile peppers add to foods, they also add some important nutrients like Vitamin A, C, and potassium. It is also thought that chile peppers have an antibacterial effect that may slow food spoilage.

If you don't usually eat spicy food, now is a good time to give it a try. Adding spice to your food is a great alternative to salt as a way to add flavor in a healthy way. Try heating up a cold winter day with one of these spicy ideas:

- ▶ Dip baked tortilla chips in a spicy salsa.
- ▶ Spice up a shrimp cocktail with a chile rub.
- ▶ Add chiles to your sautéed vegetables for a whole new taste.
- ▶ Give your cornbread a Southwestern flair with jalapeños.
- ▶ Get a new flavor from your soup with a couple splashes of hot chile sauce.

Chile Pepper Trivia:

- ▶ Chile peppers have been a part of the human diet in the Americas since about 7500 BC.
- ▶ The "heat" of chile peppers is measured in Scoville units. The Red Savina Habanero and the Naga Jolokia both claim to be the hottest pepper on record.
- ▶ Birds don't get the same burning sensation that mammals get from eating hot chile peppers. They are actually a big part of birds' diets in areas where chile peppers grow.
- ▶ Don't handle the heat very well? The most effective way to relieve the burning sensation is to cool the mouth and throat with cool food or cool beverages like yogurt, ice cream, or milk.

