October Is Popcorn Month

October 2003

Popcorn is one snack that’s actually good for you! Plain popcorn is high in fiber and very low in calories and fat. But beware, add-ins like butter or cheese can really push the numbers into unhealthy territory. Read the nutrition label to make sure your microwave popcorn isn’t a heavy weight. Three cups of Pop Secret Light Natural Microwave popcorn weighs in at a mere 75 calories with zero fat. The same three cups of Orville Movie Theater Butter-Flavored microwave popcorn has 215 calories/15.6 grams of fat.

Popcorn History
We may think of popcorn as a thoroughly modern “creation”, but it’s really an ancient grain. The oldest ears of popcorn ever found were discovered in a bat cave in New Mexico in 1948—they were 5,600 years old. Archaeologists discovered 1,000 year old popcorn grains in Peruvian tombs and they were so well preserved that they still popped. During the Depression, popcorn (at 5 or 10 cents a bag) was one of the few luxuries down-and-out families could afford. Today, according to the U.S. Popcorn Board, the average American eats about 68 quarts of popcorn each year, most of it consumed at the movies or while watching television. A word of warning here—movie theater popcorn can be nutritionally outrageous. A large (20 cups) popped in coconut oil is 1,160 calories with 77 grams of fat. Add butter topping and that increases to 1,640 calories with 126 grams of fat.

Ever wonder what makes popcorn pop? The folklore of some Native American tribes told of spirits who lived inside each kernel of popcorn. The spirits were quiet and content to live on their own but grew angry if their houses were heated. The hotter their homes became, the angrier they would get—shaking the kernels until the heat was too much. Finally they would burst out of their homes and into the air as a disgruntled puff of steam.

Less imaginative people would tell you that each kernel contains a small amount of water stored in a circle of soft starch inside the hard outer casing. When heated to around 450ºF, the moisture turns to steam, creating pressure within. As the pressure builds, the casing eventually gives way, and the kernel explodes and pops, allowing the water to escape as steam and turning the kernel inside out.