

Sweet or Risky? The Truth About Dates

They may look like giant raisins, but they're not; in fact, they can be safely shared with pets. Just make sure to give them in very small quantities, as they have high amounts of sugar.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker



STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dates contain important phytochemicals like polyphenols, particularly phenolic acid, as well as isoflavones, lignins, tannins and sterols
- Beta-carotene (vitamin A precursor), lutein and zeaxanthin are found in dates, and they have the potential to protect cells and other structures in the body from the damaging effects of free radicals
- Dates are not toxic to pets, but a single date can contain 5.07 grams of sugar, which is why they should only be shared with pets in very small amounts and infrequently
- Date pits are not toxic, but they can pose a choking hazard, especially to small breeds. Remove the pit by slicing the date lengthwise and popping it out
- When buying dates, make sure to purchase spray-free dates that come from sustainable source

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Dates are often confused as being related to raisins, because of their similar appearance (albeit they are much larger), which is why pet parents often worry about sharing them with their pets. But on the contrary, dates come from a different plant and are not toxic to cats or dogs. However, one caveat is they contain a high amount of sugar, which is why other fruits are healthier to share with pets before choosing dates. The good news is dates are not toxic to pets.

What Are Dates and What Do They Taste Like?

Known as one of the sweetest fruits in the world,¹ dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*) grow in heavy clusters on date palm trees, which can reach 82 feet (25 meters) high.² They are classified as stone fruits, with their flesh surrounding a seed — other fruits that fall into this category are mangoes and peaches.³

Dates are exceptionally sweet, with a creamy, chewy texture and an almost caramel-like flavor⁴ (though certain varieties may have distinct flavors), which is why many people love to snack on them. They can work well in savory or sweet dishes, and can be added to smoothies and protein shakes for their sweetness.⁵ But they're high in sugar — a single date can contain 5.07 grams of sugar.⁶

Hence, dates are not the healthiest fruit to share with pets. They should only be shared with pets in very small amounts and infrequently, if at all.



Did You Know?

The date palm has been cultivated in North Africa and the Middle East for at least 5,000 years, making it one of the most ancient cultivated trees in the world.⁷



Beneficial Phytochemicals Found in Dates

Dates contain phytochemicals like polyphenols, particularly phenolic acid, as well as isoflavones, lignins, tannins and sterols,^{8,9} all of which offer many benefits to humans thanks to their antioxidant capacity. Phytochemicals also have cholesterol-lowering properties and may have protective benefits against cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.¹⁰

Tannins, for example, have antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and anticancer effects, as well as other physiological effects on animals, such as “anti-infective, anti-inflammatory, and anti-hemorrhagic”¹¹ properties, while sterols are known for their cardiovascular benefits. A 2015 study noted that plant sterols may help reduce atherogenesis (formation of fatty plaques in the arteries) in animal models.¹²

One study looked at the potential of polyphenols in date seed extract (DSE) against cancer cell activities, and DNA and protein damage. The researchers noted, “DSE reduces the proliferation of hepatic, colorectal, and breast cancer cells dose-dependently through apoptotic mechanisms.”¹³



Date Fruit Trivia

There are over 1,500 varieties of dates found all over the world.¹⁴ Some popular ones include medjool, pirom, deglet noor, thoory, marhi and safawi, and they vary in terms of taste and texture. For example, medjool dates are soft, sweet and fibrous, while thoory are dry with a nutty flavor.¹⁵



Dates Also Contain Carotenoids and Flavonoids

As for carotenoids, beta-carotene (vitamin A precursor), lutein and zeaxanthin are found in dates, and they have the potential to protect cells and other structures in the body from the damaging effects of free radicals.¹⁶ One study involving sled dogs noted lutein and beta-carotene’s ability to help protect against oxidative damage.¹⁷ Lutein and zeaxanthin also help protect retinal function and may delay age-related macular degeneration.¹⁸

Dates also offer flavonoids,¹⁹ which have anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, antiviral, antiallergic and antineoplastic effects.²⁰ One study looked at the nutritional profile of Niger date fruit and found that it has longevity-boosting and pharmacological properties thanks to its high alkaloid content.²¹

Top Producers of Dates Worldwide



Producing more than 1 million metric tons of fresh dates every year, Egypt ranks as the top producer of dates worldwide, followed by Iran with 950,000 metric tons and Saudi Arabia with 837,000 metric tons.²² In the U.S., California is the top producer of dates.²³



Share Dates with Your Pets Sparingly

Because of their high sugar content, dates should not be fed regularly to pets. However, they are not toxic if pets accidentally consume them, recognizing the pits can be a choking hazard. When buying dates, make sure to purchase spray-free dates that come from sustainable sources. If you decide to share a date with your pet, chop off a tiny piece; don't give them whole dates.

Are Date Fruits Sustainable?

“Did you know that dates are called the original sustainable fruit? This is because almost all the parts of the fruit and the palm tree itself can be used.”

The leaves of the tree can be used to weave mats and baskets, while the date seeds can be roasted, ground and used as a coffee substitute. Meanwhile, the trunks are used as building materials and fuel. According to Food Revolution Network:²⁴

“Date palm biomass can be used to make biofertilizers, biofuels, and fuel pellets that can be used in place of coal in power plants and other industries. Date palm fibers and other biomass may even be used to make paper, transportation fuels, and heating energy.”

One concern with date production is that in some date-producing nations like Saudi Arabia, date palm wastes are burned in farms or disposed of in landfills, which can cause environmental pollution. However, there are now various physicochemical, thermal and biochemical technologies that are believed to help make date palm production more sustainable, such as composting into fertilizer.²⁵

Sources and References

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