



Timing is everything—even when it comes to biting into a piece of fruit. Science shows that the antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, fat, and even calories in natural's candy can vary significantly depending on its ripeness.

A little science lesson: When a fruit ripens, its starch is converted into sugar, making it softer and sweeter, says Joseph Scheerens, Ph.D., a horticulture professor at Ohio State University. Often there's a loss of acidity and a change in color as well. In evolutionary terms, this makes the fruit more appealing texturally, taste-wise, and visually, which means it's more likely to be eaten by animals and have its seeds dispersed.

These differences aren't just aesthetic, though; there's also a shift nutritionally. "The ripening process is a somewhat oxidatively stressful situation for plants, so they develop antioxidants to defend themselves against that stress," Scheerens says. Great for that cherry or mango to survive, and even better for your body when you eat it. Some plants also see an increase or decrease in vitamin and mineral levels, though this varies from fruit to fruit, Scheerens says.

Follow this guide to know when it's best to chomp into your favorite fruits.

## **Berries and Grapes**

Ripe berries and grapes boast higher levels of anthocyanins, an anti-inflammatory flavonoid that may protect your brain, DeVito says. Pick out ripe berries and grapes by their sweet smell, vibrant color, and plump, uniform texture. Stored in the fridge, ripe berries will stay good for up to three days; grapes last for a week. Keep the stems on until you're ready to eat them, which will help them stay fresh, DeVito says.

## Tomatoes

Half of a tomato's lycopene develops in the final stages of ripening, a 2012 study reported.

This antioxidant is thought to promote heart health and lower your risk for some types of cancer, so look for ones that are bright red (or yellow or orange if it's an heirloom variety) and yield slightly when pressed. [Tweet this tip <sup>[5]</sup>!] On your countertop they'll stay at peak ripeness for one to three days, DeVito says.

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