

Poppin' Up Popcorn!

Popcorn is a popular snack food. Who does not love popcorn? I remember my mom making popcorn on the stove. She would add kernels to a large pot of sizzling oil, top it with a lid and shake it. Then she would wait for the popping to begin. Mom would top the popped corn with butter and a sprinkling of salt.

Popcorn is a whole-grain maize (corn) product. There are four basic types of corn and they all have distinguishing traits and uses. The corn which produces kernels that pop into the delicious snack we all know and love is a different type than the one we eat at the dinner table. The only variety of corn that can pop is the *Zea mays everta*.

Popcorn is made up of three main components: endosperm, germ, and the pericarp or hull. The outer layer is the hull. Inside the hull is the endosperm. The endosperm is comprised of starch granules and a small amount of moisture. The germ is the living part of the kernel.

Air-popped, unsalted popcorn contains many minerals and vitamins, including calcium, potassium, vitamin K, and Vitamin A. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), a typical 3-cup serving of air-popped popcorn contains 3.5 g of fiber. A typical serving of popcorn also contains just over 3 grams of protein.

Popcorn needs heat to pop. The water expands when the kernels heat up, building pressure against the hard starch surface. Eventually, the hard starch surface gives way, causing the popcorn to 'pop.' As this happens, the soft starch inside the popcorn becomes inflated and bursts, turning the kernel inside out. The steam from inside the kernel is released, the popcorn is popped, and ready to enjoy.

When popcorn pops, it is usually one of two shapes, butterfly or mushroom. Butterfly popcorn is irregularly shaped and has large bumps. It is light and crispy but can break easily. Mushroom-shaped popcorn is round in the center with a rough surface. This shape is sturdy, making it best when adding coatings or flavorings.

Freshly popped popcorn is a delicious treat, but there is nothing quite like the disappointment of burnt popcorn or unpopped kernels. Follow these tips for perfect popcorn:

Stovetop Popcorn Tips

1. Pour vegetable oil to cover the bottom of a pan, and turn on medium-high heat. Allow pan to warm.
2. Add kernels in a single layer to cover the bottom of the pan, shake the kernels with oil to coat, and cover with a lid.
3. Once the popping starts, gently shake the pan by moving it back and forth over the burner. When the popping slows, listen until you can count 2 seconds between pops. Turn off the heat and remove the pan from the burner. Lift the lid away from your face to allow the steam to escape.
4. Dump the popcorn into a wide bowl. Immediately add toppings if desired.

Microwave Popcorn Tips

1. When making microwave popcorn, following the instructions on the bag or the side of the popcorn box is best. Your popcorn should be placed “right side up.” If you use the “popcorn” setting found on most microwaves, remember that microwaves vary, so use this as a starting point. If the popcorn button does not provide you with your desired results, time how long it takes the bag to pop.
2. When starting the microwave, popcorn should pop within the first few minutes. When the popping slows, listen until you can count 2 seconds between pops. Remove the bag from the microwave and open the bag away from your face.

Popcorn is an irresistible treat. Whether stovetop popped, hot from the microwave, or ready to eat, Americans love popcorn.

(Sources: www.pbs.org; www.popcorn.org; www.usda.gov)