

Researcher says maple syrup could be more than tasty

Maple syrup could substitute for other sugars because it contains two dozen antioxidants which help maintain health

BY RAY FORD
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Good news, pancake lovers: maple syrup contains many of the same beneficial compounds featured in such good-for-you foods as fruits, vegetables, tea and dark chocolate.

That's the finding of a research effort headed by Mamdouh Abou-Zaid, a research scientist at the Canadian Forest Service's Great Lakes Forestry Centre in Sault Ste. Marie.

Abou-Zaid's team, based in the Sault and Ottawa, analysed four grades of syrup, ranging from extra-light to amber, all of it produced locally on St. Joseph's Island. The syrups contained two dozen antioxidants, naturally-occurring compounds that reduce cell aging, slow cell breakdown, and may prevent cancer and maintain vascular health.

The key component was a complex mix of flavonoids, the family of naturally-occurring chemicals also found in tea, chocolate, colourful fruits and vegetables, and wine.

"What we were able to find is maple syrup doesn't only include sugar content, it contains other compounds that could be beneficial," Abou-Zaid says.



The method of processing of the maple syrup doesn't appear to have an effect on the antioxidants it contains

While the findings shouldn't encourage anyone to start guzzling gallons of syrup, non-diabetics "probably can eat it two or three times a week, and you don't have to feel bad about it," he adds. "It could be part of promoting healthy eating. Instead of using sugar, you could substitute maple syrup, because you're getting other components, too."

Abou-Zaid is best known for helping isolate the anti-cancer drug Taxol from the needles of the Canadian yew (or ground hemlock.) Now he's scout-

ing for other valuable pharmaceuticals in the Canadian forest, and the maple syrup study is a byproduct of that research.

"We were already looking at the leaves, the bark, and different parts of the (maple) tree, but several years ago I started looking at the sap, and then we began looking at syrup, too."

The Ontario-based work builds on earlier Quebec research that also found beneficial qualities in syrup. So far, Abou-Zaid says processing of the syrup

— whether it was evaporated in traditional way or with reverse osmosis — doesn't have a significant effect on antioxidants, and neither does the grade.

Further research will look at how the compounds get into the syrup (he speculates they may leach in from the trunk), detail actual amounts of antioxidants, and profile minerals and proteins.

Abou-Zaid's initial findings were published in the January, 2008 issue of the scientific journal, *Pharmaceutical Biology*.