

An Unexpected Superfood: All About Eggs

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About 40 years ago, excessive dietary cholesterol was labeled a public health concern. Specifically, it was thought that there was a causal link between consumption of cholesterol-laden foods and increased risk of heart disease.¹ As a result, for many years, one of the healthiest and most convenient food options suffered from a smear campaign that boosted sales of "egg alternatives." But as happens so often, the truth eventually comes out. In the case of eggs, the reality is they've gotten a bad rap.

Cholesterol: Good and Bad

The original confusion regarding egg consumption stemmed from their cholesterol content. The average large egg contains more than 200 mg of cholesterol, which accounts for about two-thirds of the recommended daily allowance. Since high cholesterol was linked to heart disease, it seemed logical to suggest limiting any foods with a high cholesterol content. Thus, eggs became a food to be avoided at all costs, resulting in about a 30 percent per-capita drop in egg consumption among Americans.²

Then scientists began to recognize the difference between "good cholesterol" and "bad cholesterol." Healthy foods with "good fats" will raise HDL (high-density lipoprotein) or good cholesterol levels, which is beneficial.³ Suddenly, eggs weren't so bad after all.

Healthy and Nutritious

The reality is that eggs are an amazing source of protein, vitamins, minerals, amino acids, omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants. While once considered a health risk, the egg can actually be called a "superfood."⁴ Yes, the yolk does contain the lion's share of cholesterol, but it also contains almost 3 grams of protein and is a great source of vitamins A, D, B₆, B₁₂ and iron. Consuming only the egg white eliminates many of the nutrients and all of the antioxidants found in eggs.⁴⁻⁵

Eggs (yolk and white) contain vitamins A, B₂, B₅, B₆, B₁₂, D, E, and K, calcium, folate, phosphorus, selenium and zinc. As a whole, the egg has 77 calories, 6 grams of protein, 5 grams of healthy or good fats, and omega-3 fatty acids, which lower triglycerides (a well-known risk factor for heart disease).⁴⁻⁵

This amazing food also contains the cell membrane-building nutrient choline, which is lacking in almost 90 percent of diets. Choline is important from a health perspective because it promotes normal cell activity, liver function and nutrient transportation in the body. Then there's the nine essential amino acids the egg contains.⁵

Last, but not least, eggs can actually be beneficial for eye health, since they contain the important

antioxidants lutein and zeaxanthin, which have shown to help prevent macular degeneration and cataracts.⁴

Convenient and Versatile

With all its amazing nutritional and health benefits, the egg is a great meal or snack. Whether boiled, poached, scrambled or fried, it can be part of any meal, and when you're on the run, it is probably one of the most healthy items to eat on the go. With zero carbs, no sugar, no gluten and 6 grams of protein, an egg should be a dietary staple.⁵

Organic or Non-Organic?

As with many food items, it is my recommendation that the best source is always going to be organic. Surprisingly, the omega-3 levels in eggs can actually be affected by the hens' diet and can be increased in either organic or conventional eggs. However, clearly a healthier diet and better care are provided to hens that lay eggs labeled organic.⁶

A primary concern in non-organic eggs may be contamination. However, while chicken meat has tested positive for arsenic and other contaminants, a study in 2011 tested 497 egg samples and found no residue of pesticides, contaminants or veterinary drugs including antibiotics. A poultry scientist from Auburn University, Pat Curtis, says that this shouldn't be surprising, as chemicals are not typically given to laying hens, and when they are, there is a "mandated withdrawal period" before their eggs can be sold.⁶

While this may be comforting, I suggest that to avoid any risk of contamination by pesticides or other chemicals, organic will always be the best source.

Allergy Information

According to the Mayo Clinic, eggs are one of the most common food allergen for children, with symptoms manifesting as early as infancy.⁷ While allergic reactions may vary from one person to another, they will generally occur soon after exposure and can include the following: skin inflammation or hives; nasal congestion, runny nose and sneezing; digestive symptoms such as cramps, nausea and vomiting; and asthmatic signs and symptoms such as coughing wheezing, chest tightness or shortness of breath.⁷⁻⁸

One of the easiest ways to test for food allergens is to keep a food or dietary journal. Parents can track what their child eats and when they have an allergic reaction; then remove eggs from the child's diet to see if there is a reduction or elimination of symptoms.⁹

If your child patient is allergic to eggs, it helps if parents are aware of potentially hidden sources of egg in the child's diet such as: marshmallows, mayonnaise, baked goods, breaded foods, processed meat, salad dressings, most pastas and even pretzels, as they are typically dipped in an "egg wash" before being salted. Additionally, there are manufacturing terms that can indicate the presence of eggs, including albumin, globulin, lecithin, livetin, lysozyme, vitelline and words starting with the prefix "ova" or "ovo," such as ovalbumin or ovoglobulin.⁷⁻⁸

The Vaccine Link

Some vaccines actually contain egg proteins and may pose a risk of triggering an allergic reaction. While some sources say the risk is minimal and that informing the pediatrician of the egg allergy can avoid any complications, it is wise to consider these concerns and make sure parents are informed.⁸⁻¹⁰

The following vaccines are produced with eggs or egg protein:⁸⁻¹⁰

- Measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccines are produced using eggs.
- Flu (influenza) vaccines sometimes contain small amounts of egg proteins.
- Yellow fever vaccine can provoke an allergic reaction in some people who have egg allergies.
- Other vaccines are generally not risky for people with an egg allergy, but it is always best to discuss concerns with a doctor, as they can test for allergic reactions.

An Egg a Day

Eggs are one of the most beneficial food items available for consumption. They are incredibly filling and high in protein, which is by far the most filling macronutrient. Eggs score high on the satiety index, which measures the ability of foods to induce feelings of fullness and reduce subsequent caloric intake. When all is said and done, for any meal or snack, you can't beat an egg.

Getting Kids to Consider Eggs

Little ones can be extremely picky eaters, particularly during the first 10 years of life, but introducing the egg early may help foster a healthy protein habit. A simple way of using the egg for breakfast is creating an egg burrito, which also gives parents the opportunity to fill gluten-free tortillas with finely chopped veggies. For Paleo families, a lettuce wrap will substitute for grain products. Half a hard-boiled egg with a slice of apple or avocado can serve as a balanced snack.

For the sneak approach, scrambled eggs, finely chopped and added to spaghetti sauce, can do the trick. And a raw egg (presuming you know the source of your eggs) added to a smoothie will never be noticed.

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