

There's a lot to love about eggs. Eggs are a versatile food – they can be fried, scrambled, boiled, poached, baked and pickled; whipped egg whites add fluffiness to soufflés, meringues and pavlovas, while egg yolks act as emulsifiers in mayo, aioli and other sauces.

From a nutrition standpoint, eggs are an inexpensive source of easily digested protein. They are one of the few natural food sources of vitamin D and are also rich in vitamins A and E, folate, phosphorus and choline, a nutrient that plays a role in brain development and may help prevent heart disease.

Of course, eggs do have their detractors. Many people avoid eggs – egg yolks especially – due to their high cholesterol content. Last summer, eggs made headlines

as a study stated that they were as bad for you as smoking in terms of health risk!

So are eggs good or bad for us? At the end of the day, your personal nutrition priorities play a big factor; here are some facts to help you come up with an answer on your own.

Are eggs really as bad as smoking?

Nutrition advice from the '70s to the early '90s recommended that people avoid eggs due to their high cholesterol. However, we now know that cholesterol in our diet has little to do with our cholesterol levels; foods that are high in saturated and trans fats have a much bigger impact. Now that eggs are considered "healthy" by many, it was shocking when a study last year concluded that egg yolks were just as bad as smoking when it comes to heart health. The researchers pointed toward eggs' high cholesterol levels as the reason behind the increased risk for heart disease.

What the researchers actually did was compare the amount of egg yolks and cigarettes that subjects consumed against

the plaque build-up in their arteries. In both cases, subjects who ate more egg yolks or smoked more cigarettes tended to have more plaque build-up, and the pattern of increase was similar, which is how the researchers came to their conclusion.

It's important to remember that correlation does not equal causation. Even though people who ate more egg yolks or smoked more cigarettes had more plaque build-up, it might not necessarily be the cause. The study authors admit that they failed to account for exercise, but they also didn't consider many aspects of diet and lifestyle that can affect plaque build-up and heart health.

Additionally, the subjects were all patients of a vascular clinic, meaning that they probably already had higher risk of heart disease or stroke. Most of the subjects were overweight and their average age was 61.5 years. In comparison, the average age of the population of Calgary is 35 years. It does not make sense to extrapolate the results of this study to our population.



Are Eggs All That They're Cracked Up To Be?

By VINCCI TSUI, RD

So what is the deal with eggs and cholesterol?

It's true that egg yolks are high in cholesterol. The Heart and Stroke Foundation recommends that most people eat less than 300 mg of cholesterol per day, and a single large egg contains 195 mg of cholesterol. However, studies have consistently shown that for most people, eating up to one egg yolk per day (seven eggs per week) does not increase heart disease or stroke risk. If you have diabetes, high cholesterol or pre-existing heart disease, then you are at increased risk and it is recommended to limit egg yolk consumption to two per week, in addition to limiting saturated and trans fat intake.

It's okay to just avoid egg yolks altogether, but you will be missing out on the most nutritious part of the egg. Egg yolks contain all of the vitamins A, D, E, choline and lutein, and most of the folate and phosphorus found in an egg.

What about omega-3 eggs?

Omega-3s are essential fatty acids, meaning that we can only get them from our diet. They have been getting a lot of attention in the past few years as they have been linked to decreased inflammation, heart disease and cognitive decline.

Omega-3 eggs are created by feeding laying hens flaxseed or fish oil. However, the amount of omega-3 in the eggs produced is actually very little, about 400 mg. Compare that to a 90 g (3 oz) serving of salmon, which has over 2,000 mg!

Most of the omega-3 found in omega-3 eggs are alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), which are mainly found in plants and do not have the same benefits as eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) or docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), the omega-3s found in fish. While some ALA can be converted into EPA and DHA in our bodies, it does so very inefficiently. The bottom line is, omega-3 eggs are not providing that much extra nutrition.

Are free-range or organic eggs better for me?

As concerns grow around animal welfare, "free-range" or "cage-free" eggs are becoming more popular. Aside from some organic certification requirements, there are no legal definitions or reinforcement of those terms, so while we may imagine free-range hens roaming around a sunny, grassy farmyard, the reality may be that they are kept in a crowded barn with a ramp that goes outside. If you are worried about the well-being of the hens who lay your eggs, get to know local egg producers and ask questions about how they care for their hens. Nutritionally, free-range eggs are similar to factory-farmed eggs. If the hens are pasture-raised, their eggs may be slightly more nutritious if they have more variety in their diet.

All organic products are regulated by standards set by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. In other words, organic eggs must meet certain standards in terms of what the hens are fed and how they are raised before they can be certified. Still, the current evidence shows that most organic foods are not significantly better than their conventional counterparts. However, if you are concerned about lowering your intake of pesticides and other synthetic chemicals, organics may be a better choice.

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