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Heart, Hope, Healing

Healing Foods: My Favorite Healthy Fats

BY KARYN SHANKS MD | AUGUST 30, 2016



You've gotten the word that fats are good now, right? How did we get so far off track with this vital aspect of our nutrition for so many years? I avoided fat for decades (eek!), thinking it would make me fat and clog my arteries. I'm convinced my behavior contributed to my own major health melt down, thankfully resolved with excellent nutrition, including lots of health fat.

Healthy Fats are Necessary for Good Health:

1. Fats make every cell and sub-cellular membrane healthy: this is where the action of our cell-to-cell signaling happens. Membranes are the brains of our cells.

2. Fats modulate inflammation in the very best way.
3. Fats help us make good, clean energy.
4. Fats help fight infection and allergy.
5. Fats are precursors to all of our major hormones.
6. Fats insulate our nerves and help our brains send and receive information.
7. Fats help moderate our insulin levels and keep our blood sugar down.
8. Fats make our skin and hair gorgeous, and lubricate our eyes and mucus membranes.

My Top Four Healthy Fats

The following are four of the healthiest fat sources on the planet. I include them in my meals every day.

Coconut Oil:

Derived from the humble coconut, this oil contains healthy fats called medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs) and lauric acid. MCTs are excellent sources of fat for energy production. Because of their unique size and structure, they do not require digestion, and go straight to the liver for processing into energy. Therefore, coconut oil is a great fat source for people with digestive difficulties, deficiencies in bile acids or pancreatic enzymes, or those recovering from pancreatitis. MCTs drive energy production with less utilization of oxygen compared to sugars and other fats. This is good because *more* energy from *less* oxygen means fewer free radicals and less tissue damage (oxidative stress is the price we pay with our health to make energy from oxygen—our bodies utilize anti-oxidants to protect us from this process).

Coconut oil contains 40% lauric acid, a fat found abundantly in breast milk, and known for its antibacterial and antiviral properties. Studies have shown that lauric acid (converted to monolaurin in the body) supports the immune system in its efforts to manage viral, bacterial and fungal infections.

Coconut oil has been shown to have benefits in these conditions: Alzheimer's disease, heart and vascular disease, hypertension, urinary tract infections, digestive dysfunction, gall bladder disease, pancreatitis, gum disease, obesity, chronic fatigue, memory and cognitive decline, arthritis, and inflammatory or autoimmune disorders.

Coconut oil can be used for moderate-to-high heat cooking or baking. It's light flavor is delicious with vegetables, meats and roasting nuts and seeds. It can be plopped into smoothies or licked right off the spoon. Full-fatted coconut milk can also be used, which is simply coconut meat blended well with water. It has a rich, creamy texture and goes great in curries, smoothies, coffee or tea, or warmed up and poured over mixed nut-seed granola. If

you are just getting to know coconut oil, try to use a couple of tablespoons of pure oil or full-fatted milk (canned, please, not the processed, watered-down coconut milk product in a carton) daily. If you are already using it regularly and are trying to cut down on your carbohydrate intake, (perhaps working on nutritional ketosis) use coconut oil, coconut milk and MCT oil liberally: 1/2-1 full can coconut milk, 3-5 tablespoons of coconut oil or MCT oil, or more, per day.

Olive Oil:

Derived from olives, extra-virgin, fresh cold-pressed olive oil, is best for flavor and nutrient content. Olive oil is a rich source of oleic acid, a monounsaturated fat, and polyphenols, a family of molecules that have the profound ability to downshift inflammation and oxidative stress (free radical damage) through changes in gene expression. It's unclear how much of the health benefit observed in olive oil consumers is due to the type of fat or the polyphenol content. Most likely, like all food, it is a complex interaction between all of its nutrients. There is an extensive literature on the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet, rich in olives and olive oil, that show benefits for cardioprotection, cancer occurrence and recurrence risk (especially for breast, respiratory and upper gastrointestinal cancers), digestion, bone health, cognitive and neuroprotection, and inflammatory disorders.

Use only organic, extra-virgin, preferably fresh-pressed varieties of olive oil. Low-to-moderate heat sautee is fine with fresh-pressed varieties because of the extensive polyphenol protection of the fats (unsaturated fats are at risk for oxidation when heated, leading to toxicity—this risk is markedly reduced when the oil has a high polyphenol content). The best way to use olive oil is as a salad dressing. Use 3-5 tablespoons oil with balsamic vinegar to taste, and mix in a clove of fresh crushed garlic. Toss into your favorite mix of fresh veggies. Olive oil can also be plopped into smoothies, used to cook or bake meats, eggs and veggies.

Avocados:

The fat of avocados, like olives, is rich in monounsaturated fat. They are also great sources of phytosterols, known for their potent anti-inflammatory properties. The carotenoids found in avocados and other colored veggies are better absorbed with fat, making the avocado the perfect vehicle for nutrient absorption. Interestingly the pulp closest to the skin of the avocado is the richest source of phytonutrients. You'll see this when you open an avocado as the dark green outermost flesh. Avocados are also great sources of fiber, potassium, vitamin K, magnesium, copper and folate. Eating avocados reduces cardiovascular risk, oxidative stress and inflammatory disorders.

Buy avocados that are dark green and just slightly soft when you press the flesh with your finger. Slice them lengthwise, around the seed so there are two longitudinal halves. Pull the skin off gently with your fingers so the outer, nutrient-rich, part of the flesh is left intact. Eat as-is, mashed into guacamole, used as a spread, or chopped into salads. I like to cut them in half, coat with olive oil and grill until just lightly browned. Fill with a little olive oil, balsamic

vinegar, chopped red pepper, salt and pepper. Yum!

Omega-3-Fats:

These are derived from fatty fish (wild-caught salmon and sardines), nuts (walnuts), seeds (flaxseeds and hemp seeds), and pasture-fed animals. Alpha-linolenic acid (ALA) is the omega-3 fat found in plants. It must be converted by the body into eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), which exert the health benefits of the omega-3 fat family. Omega-3 fats are polyunsaturated fats, which means they have multiple double bonds that make them flexible and interactive, an excellent thing for our cell membranes. This property also makes these fats fragile and more vulnerable to oxidative damage, so they must be especially well cared for (kept cool, well-contained, and consumed while fresh).

EPA is a potently anti-inflammatory fat. It can be used in high doses, beyond what one would need to meet basic needs, to reduce excesses of inflammation. Studies have shown benefit in vascular disease, inflammatory and autoimmune disorders, dry eyes, and many more. Any problem associated with inflammation can potentially be modulated by the use of EPA. The typical dose for such conditions is 3-5 grams daily, taken with food.

DHA is important for optimal brain function. A healthy brain should be 15-20% DHA by weight (and 60% total fat by weight). DHA in the diet can be used to improve cognitive function, prevent neurodegeneration, and to treat a myriad of mood and behavioral disorders.

Consume omega-3 fats in your diet regularly. If you are a strict vegan, have your fatty acid levels tested. You may be consuming ALA in abundance from plant sources, but it is important to find out if you can convert that ALA into EPA and DHA. If not, you will need to supplement with a vegan source of DHA (which will convert to EPA), from algae. For fish eaters, consuming wild-caught salmon or sardines a couple times per week is great. Pasture-raised animal products will also provide omega-3 fats (note that commercially raised feed lot beef and chicken have a completely different fat profile and do not contain these important fats). If you don't like fish or are interested in improvements in inflammatory conditions, take a fish oil (EPA-DHA) supplement. Choose one from a company who thoroughly tests their products for the presence of mercury and pesticides, stabilizes them with vitamin E and rosemary extract. For general use 1-2 grams per day of a combination of EPA and DHA is a good place to start. For inflammatory disorders, a higher dose, 3-5 grams per day is generally used.

So, embrace fat everyone! And please let me know what else you would like to know.

Companies I like to use for fish oil products: Metagenics, Designs for Health, Xymogen, Nordic Naturals

Good resource about dietary fats and health: *Mark Hyman, MD. Eat Fat, Get Thin: Why the Fat We Eat is the Key to Sustained Weight Loss and Vibrant Health.* <https://www.amazon.com/Eat-Fat-Get-Thin-Sustained/dp/0316338834/ref=tm>

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Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of *Liftoff*, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.

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