

In Praise of Eggs By James Haig, N.C.

Eggs are one of the most underrated of all foods. In the 1970's and 1980s they had to withstand an onslaught of attacks from the proponents of low fat diets, who preached that eggs contained too high levels of the demon cholesterol to be fit for human consumption! Fortunately, the tides of nutritional opinion have turned, and the humble egg is once again being rehabilitated.

Eggs contain an almost perfect amino acid profile. Amino acids are the building blocks of protein, and eggs contain all the essential amino acids in almost perfect ratios, in a way that few other foods (except whey protein) do. As a result, the protein in eggs is exceptionally bioavailable.

Furthermore, eggs are an excellent source of fat soluble Vitamin A and D, the B-complex vitamins (especially folic acid and biotin), minerals such as calcium, potassium, phosphorus and iron, and various types of lipids (fats), approximately two-thirds of which are unsaturated, and include the essential fatty acids. The whites are almost entirely composed of protein, while the yolks mainly contain the fats and other nutrients. Eggs also contain about 250 mg of cholesterol, which is the source of their undeserved infamy!

So what about cholesterol? First of all, cholesterol is a vital nutrient, with numerous important functions: it is a crucial component of all cell membranes; it provides the raw material for all of the steroid hormones; it has antioxidant properties; is vital for the transport of fats and fat-soluble nutrients in the bloodstream; and it is one of the main components of brain tissue. Without adequate cholesterol in our bodies we would die.

Fortunately, our liver manufactures its own supply, synthesizing approximately eight egg's worth of cholesterol a day. So what happens when we eat cholesterol from dietary sources, such as eggs? The brain simply sends a message to the liver telling it to cut back on its production. (A small percent of the population has lost this feedback mechanism and so they may indeed need to limit their dietary cholesterol intake). Furthermore, eggs also contain a generous amount of lecithin, which helps to emulsify the cholesterol so that it flows freely through the veins, without risk of clumping.

In the last few years it has become widely accepted that it is sugar, refined starches and hydrogenated oils that are the primary culprits in raising blood cholesterol levels, not dietary cholesterol itself. Other factors, such as elevated homocysteine, are now thought to be much more important than cholesterol levels in the development of atherosclerosis, the hardening of the arteries that is a major factor in many (but by no means all) cases of heart disease. By that as it may, there has never been a single scientific study showing that eating eggs raises serum cholesterol levels to any significant degree, nor that eating eggs represents any increased risk of heart disease whatsoever!

Not all eggs are created equal, however. Commercially raised chickens eat an unnatural diet and live in concentration camp conditions that are not only inhumane but which require antibiotics (that end up in the eggs) to control disease. Furthermore, their eggs are nutritionally inferior, as indicated their anemic pale yellow yolks. Health food store eggs (organic and “cage free”) are considerable better in quality, but are generally not truly free range, meaning that the chicken are not free to peck around in the yard to eat the seeds, greens, grit (for minerals) and bugs that produce superior quality eggs. True free range eggs are usually found more easily in local farmers’ markets and in select stores.

Eggs are best eaten with the yolks intact (boiled or poached) to minimize oxidation. Fried eggs should be avoided, as should powdered eggs which have been dangerously oxidized in processing. Eggs are one of the most nutrient-dense foods on the plant, and happily, are suitable for all metabolic types.