

How To Cut Fat, Add Energy

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Special for eDiets

January 14, 2005

Within a varied diet, there's some room for liberal use of what I like to think of as super foods. Some of these foods are nutrition powerhouses -- that is, ounce for ounce they contain more vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals than other foods or they bring

hard-to-get nutrients to the table. Because of their taste and texture, others are a great substitute for less nutritious choices. A few of them are even foods you may have written off as unhealthy and will be surprised to find can be part of a nutritious diet.

Olive oil. I use olive oil for just about everything, even for making foods like omelets, which usually get cooked in butter. Olive oil has significant health benefits. It's been shown to lower total blood cholesterol levels without lowering HDL (good cholesterol) levels; it may even raise them. And it's a good source of carotenoids and antioxidants, including vitamin E, an elusive antioxidant that appears to help prevent heart disease.

Shopping for a bottle of olive oil these days is a little like shopping for wine. There are many varieties and estate-produced bottles, and the prices can range from a few bucks to upwards of \$20. Typically, the more you pay, the purer the flavor, but there are some relatively inexpensive olive oils around that are available in supermarkets. They are high quality and great tasting.

I keep a couple of different kinds of olive oils on hand. The one I use most often is an extra-virgin olive oil. Extra virgin means that the oil has been cold pressed without chemicals. It's the fruitiest of the oils and adds wonderful flavor to food. In fact, the flavor is so intense that a little dab will do you. Using a small amount will help you keep your calorie intake down.

I also keep a light olive oil around, which is good for dishes where you want other flavors to shine. Light olive oil, for instance, works well in an Asian stir-fry, because it doesn't overpower (or mix badly with) flavors like sesame, ginger and rice wine vinegar. In an Indian dish, light olive oil can be substituted for the staple ghee (clarified butter) without obscuring the cumin and curry flavorings. (It's healthier, too.)

Soy. Tofu -- soybean curd -- is the most commonly eaten form of soy. Though a lot of people think it's too bland, that's exactly what can be great about it. Tofu takes on the taste of anything you cook it with.

You can now also find soybeans in the pod and out (known as edamame) in many markets, both fresh and frozen. To cook them, you simply place in boiling water for five minutes, drain and put in a bowl. If you like, sprinkle them lightly with salt. Edamame are also great thrown into salads and mixed into stir-fries and rice dishes.

Soy is a great substitute for animal foods and it has some health benefits of its own. Studies have shown that an ingredient in soy called isoflavones decreases the risk of heart disease, and there's ongoing research looking at the link between soy and cancer reduction.

Mushrooms.

Mushrooms, one of my favorite foods, are a good source of the antioxidant selenium as well as potassium and B vitamins. So, no, they're not, as many people think, nutritionally empty and, while they're low in calories, they're exceptionally filling. I use them in sandwiches, soups and just sautéed with a little olive oil and garlic as a side dish. Mushrooms' meaty texture makes them a good substitute for meat; portabellas, in particular, do a pretty good imitation of steak. If you're

used to eating just button mushrooms, try to expand your horizons. Shitakes (which have anti-viral properties), morels, oyster, porcini and crimini mushrooms all have their own unique texture and taste.

Walnuts, Almonds and Nut Butters. So much research has confirmed that nuts provide a healthy and satisfying form of protein and fat that I've revised my thinking on them -- I used to advise people to limit their intake of nuts and nut butters. Although they should be eaten in moderation -- they are still pretty caloric -- I recommend them as part of a healthy diet.

When you eat a small handful of walnuts or almonds, the fat and the intensity of their natural flavor will probably make your hunger vanish. Nuts -- almonds in particular -- are a good source of fiber and protein, which is why I like to sprinkle them on vegetable and fruit salads. Just a thin spread of an almond, cashew or macadamia butter (the healthiest butters) on a slice of whole-grain bread is very filling.

Eggs. People are often surprised to hear me recommend eggs, since they've been a health pariah for so long. They are now back on the good-for-you list. They're great little packages of nutrients and provide exceptionally high-quality protein.

We know a lot more about the cholesterol in foods than we did a few years ago, including the fact that it does not do as much damage as we once thought. (Of greater risk to your arteries are trans fats, like hydrogenated oils.) But everyone, especially those with high blood cholesterol levels, still has to watch his or her intake.

If you're prone to high blood cholesterol levels, you may want to stick more to egg whites than to whole eggs, but don't worry, you're not getting shorted: Egg whites contain a good deal of protein. If you're not inclined to give up the yolks completely, you can use fewer. Scramble one whole egg and two egg whites, for example. Or when a recipe calls for several eggs replace one or two of them with extra egg whites (1 egg = 2 egg whites). That way you'll get the flavor of the yolk, but not as much fat. --

Whenever possible, opt for organic eggs that come from free-range chickens. Growers who put extra effort into the feeding and care of their chickens produce more nutritious eggs -- and eggs without traces of hormones or antibiotics. Some producers are now offering omega-3 eggs, too, produced by chickens that are fed grain rich in heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

Leafy greens. The days when salads were primarily made from iceberg lettuce are gone. Or at least they should be gone. Iceberg doesn't have much to offer in the way of vitamins and minerals, but darker greens do. Make your salads from mixes of romaine, watercress, spinach, arugula, purslane, mesclun mix and other dark greens. Strong-flavored greens like kale, Swiss chard, broccoli, and mustard, collard and beet greens are rich in beta-carotene and one of the few good vegetarian sources of calcium. They make easy side dishes (just sauté with a little olive oil and garlic). But if you're a little wary of their bold flavor, chop some up and throw it into a tomato sauce to serve over pasta. You'll hardly notice the greens, but you'll get all the nutrients they have to offer.

Fish. The best source of omega-3 fatty acids we have is fish. In fact, eating two servings of fatty fish a week can lower your risk of heart disease. But don't let the word "fatty" put you off. Very little of the fat in fish is saturated and the rest of it is healthy. Mackerel, bluefish, sardines, herring, tuna, and salmon have the highest concentrations of omega-3s, although other fish contain them, too.

Berries. Gram for gram, berries have more antioxidants than any other type of fruit. You can toss berries -- blueberries, blackberries, cranberries, strawberries and raspberries -- on top of cereal or nibble on them for a snack. They also make the perfect ending to a nice meal.