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## Avocados: Health Benefits, Health Risks

Avocados are a creamy, buttery fruit grown in warm climates and often enjoyed in Mexican and South American cuisine.

Also known as an alligator pear or butter fruit, the versatile avocado is the only fruit that provides a substantial amount of monounsaturated fat (the healthy kind). Avocados are a naturally nutrient-dense food and contain nearly 20 vitamins and minerals.

This MNT Knowledge Center feature is written by MNT's qualified nutritionist and forms part of a collection of articles on the health benefits of popular foods. In the article we take an in-depth look at the possible health benefits of eating avocados as well as a nutritional breakdown of the avocado. To maintain balance, we will also look at the possible health risks of consuming avocados.

### Possible health benefits of avocados

Consuming fruits and vegetables of all kinds has long been associated with a reduced risk of many lifestyle-related health conditions. Many studies have suggested that increasing consumption of plant foods like avocados decreases the risk of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and overall mortality while promoting a healthy complexion and hair, increased energy and overall lower weight.

**Healthy for the heart:** According to registered dietitian Patricia Groziak, MS, RD, with the Hass Avocado Board, avocados contain 25 milligrams per ounce of a natural plant sterol called beta-sitosterol. Regular consumption of beta-sitosterol and other plant sterols are recommended for their ability to help maintain healthy cholesterol levels.

**Great for vision:** Avocados contain lutein and zeaxanthin, two phytochemicals that are essential to eye health. These two carotenoids act as antioxidants in the eye and can minimize the damage and reduce the risk of developing age-related macular degeneration.

**Osteoporosis prevention:** Vitamin K is often overshadowed by calcium and vitamin D when thinking of nutrients important for maintaining healthy bones, however, eating a diet with adequate vitamin K may be just as important. Vitamin K can improve bone health by increasing calcium absorption and reducing urinary excretion of calcium.<sup>3</sup>

Low intakes of vitamin K have been associated with a higher risk of bone fractures. One half of an avocado provides approximately 25% of the daily-recommended intake for vitamin K.

**Cancer fighter:** Low levels of folate have been shown to increase the risk of breast cancer in women. Adequate intake of dietary folate (from food, not necessarily supplements) has also shown promise in protecting against colon, stomach, pancreatic and cervical cancers.

Although the mechanism of protection is currently unknown, researchers believe that folate's protective effects have something to do with its role in DNA and RNA production and the prevention of mutations. One half of an avocado provides approximately 20% of the daily-recommended intake for folate.



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**Healthy babies:** Folate is also extremely important for pregnant women. Adequate intake protects against miscarriage and neural tube defects. Recent research has also shown that a father's folate status before conception may be just as important. In a study from McGill University, paternal folate deficiency in mice was associated with a 30% higher number of various birth defects than in offspring with no paternal folate deficiencies.

**Lowered risk of depression:** Another benefit of foods with high levels of folate is a lowered risk of depression. Folate helps to prevent an excess of homocysteine forming in the body, which can block blood and other nutrients from reaching the brain. Excess homocysteine can interfere with the production of the feel-good hormones serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, which regulate not only mood, but sleep and appetite as well.

**Improved digestion:** Despite its creamy texture, an avocado is actually high in fiber, with approximately 6-7 grams per half fruit. Eating foods with natural fiber can prevent constipation, maintain a healthy digestive tract and lower the risk of colon cancer.

**Natural detoxification:** Adequate fiber promotes regularity, which is crucial for the daily excretion of toxins through the bile and stool. Recent studies have shown that dietary fiber may also play a role in regulating the immune system and inflammation.

**Protection from chronic disease:** According to the Department of Internal Medicine and Nutritional Sciences Program of the University of Kentucky, high fiber intakes are associated with significantly lower risks of developing coronary heart disease, stroke, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and certain gastrointestinal diseases. Increased fiber intake has also been shown to lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, improve insulin sensitivity, and enhance weight loss for obese individuals.

### **Potential health risks of consuming avocados**

It is the total diet or overall eating pattern that is most important in disease prevention and achieving good health. It is better to eat a diet with a variety than to concentrate on individual foods as the key to good health.

If you are taking blood-thinners such as Coumadin (warfarin), it is important that you do not suddenly begin to eat more or less foods containing vitamin K, which plays a large role in blood clotting.

### **Nutritional breakdown of avocados**

According to the USDA National Nutrient Database, one serving (one-fifth of an avocado, approximately 40 grams) contains 64 calories, 6 grams of fat, 4 grams of carbohydrate, 0 grams of sugar, 3 grams of fiber and 1 gram of protein.

Avocados are a great source of vitamins C, E, K, and B-6, as well as riboflavin, niacin, folate, pantothenic acid, magnesium and potassium. They also provide lutein, beta-carotene and omega-3s.

Although most of the calories in an avocado come from fat, don't shy away! Avocados are full of healthy, beneficial fats that help to keep you full and satiated. When you consume fat, your brain receives a signal to turn off your appetite. Eating fat slows the breakdown of carbohydrates into sugar, which helps to keep sugar levels in your blood stable.

Fat is essential for every single cell in your body. In fact, over sixty percent of your brain is made of fat. Eating healthy fats will make your skin glow, increase vitamin and mineral absorption and even help boost your immune system.

Do not be fooled by fat-free and low-fat products, or shy away from foods like avocados and nuts that are full of healthy fats. Ever since the low-fat craze started in the 1950s, we have only become fatter. Manufacturers often just replace the fat in reduced and fat-free products with sugar.

This does not mean you should eat loads of bacon cheeseburgers and fried foods, because not all fats are created equal. Eating healthy fats daily (like mono- and polyunsaturated fats in avocados) will improve heart health, lower cholesterol, keep you full and satiated and curb your cravings for fried, greasy foods. On the flip side, fried foods, processed meats and cheeses contain saturated fats that clog arteries and increase cholesterol.

### **How to incorporate more avocados into your diet**

You can tell how ripe an avocado is by gently pressing into the skin. If the avocado is firm and does not budge, you will need to let it ripen for a few days before consuming. Soft avocados make great guacamole or dip, while firmer avocados are great for slicing and adding to a salad or a sandwich. To speed up the ripening process, place an avocado in a paper bag with a banana.

Avocado can be mashed and spread on toast instead of butter or sliced and added to a sandwich.

### **Quick tips:**

- Spread avocado on toast in the morning instead of butter
- Use avocado instead of mayonnaise in chicken or egg salad, or as a spread on a sandwich
- The soft, creamy texture of an avocado and its mild taste make it a perfect first food for babies.

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