

Q. Should eggs be part of a healthy diet? Eggs are a traditional part of the U.S. diet and most other cultures throughout the world. But, are they good for us?

A. A new large study reveals that eating an egg a day may increase your risk of early death.¹

Eggs developed a bad reputation when early heart studies connected blood cholesterol levels to increased risk of heart disease. They were one of the richest sources of dietary cholesterol of any food. One egg has about 200 mg of cholesterol, and the dietary guidelines recommend eating less than 300 mg of cholesterol per day.² Later studies found that dietary cholesterol had only a modest effect on blood cholesterol levels (one egg raises LDL cholesterol about 4 mg/mL)³ but the primary culprit was saturated fat.

The best way to determine if eggs are good for you or not is to study egg consumption in large numbers of people, follow them for many years, and see if it affects their health. This has been done for eggs in several studies. Let's briefly review results from some of these largest studies.

- The **Nurses' Health Study**⁴ included 80,082 women followed for 14 years. They found no significant increase in heart disease or stroke when comparing low to high egg consumption in healthy women. Diabetic women, however, had a 49% increased risk of developing coronary heart disease if they ate an egg or more per day compared to those eating less than 1 egg per day.
- The **Health Professional Follow-up Study**³ found similar results in a study of 37,581 men followed for 8 years. They found no significant increase in coronary heart disease when comparing low to high egg intake in healthy men. In diabetic men, however, they found that those who ate an egg a day compared to those who ate less than an egg per day had twice the risk (RR 2.02) of developing coronary heart disease.
- The **Physicians' Health Study**⁴ is the latest reported research on egg consumption and health risks. This study includes 21,327 participants with 20 years of follow-up, with egg intake evaluated every 2 years. In healthy



persons, researchers found no significant association of egg intake with coronary heart disease, but they did find that those who ate an egg or more per day were 41% more likely to die from any cause (after adjusting for age) compared to those who ate less than 1 egg per week. After adjusting for other risk factors (smoking, BMI, high blood pressure, physical activity, alcohol intake, diabetes, high cholesterol, vegetable intake, etc.) eating an egg a day still was a significant predictor of early mortality (23% increased risk of dying from any cause) compared to eating less than 1 egg per week. This is one in every four deaths during the 20 year study.

In diabetics, the health risk increased even more. In this group, the more eggs eaten, the higher the risk. Even eating 1 egg per week showed a 30% increased risk in mortality. Eating 2-4 eggs per week showed a 49% increased mortality rate. Diabetics who ate 5 or more eggs per week had more than twice the risk of death compared to those who seldom or never ate eggs.

So what can we conclude? In healthy persons (no diabetes) there appears to be no significant increased risk of death from eating eggs if you eat them moderately (e.g., 2-4 eggs per week). In the editorial accompanying this latest research, the authors suggested that in healthy persons (no diabetes) eating a few eggs per week (3-4) can still be "part of an overall heart healthy diet." Eggs are good sources of protein, riboflavin, and selenium – all good for the heart. Just use them moderately. Don't forget to count those eggs found in foods such as pancakes, cake, cookies, certain roasts, pudding, and other "hidden" sources.

If you are a diabetic, you would do well to greatly limit or eliminate eggs from your diet. If you still want an omelet occasionally, try one of the egg replacers (made mostly from egg whites). They make a good omelet, work well in cooking (pancakes, etc.), and may be a healthier alternative. Learning to cook without eggs appears to be best for diabetics.

References:

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