Food controversies explained: butter, eggs, and more

Being a PEBTF Health Coach is awesome! Part of my job is dispelling myths about food. In this article, I examine four controversial foods, how one dietitian feels about them, and whether you’ll see them in my kitchen.

**Butter**

**What’s the controversy?**

As a dietitian, the most classic question I get is ‘Which is better butter or margarine?’

**What’s the truth?**

Unfortunately, the answer is complicated. I put butters and margarines in four different categories. Let me explain. Good, old fashioned butter primarily contains saturated fat. Most fat from animal sources is saturated and should be limited in the diet. A high dietary intake of saturated fat has been linked to higher levels of LDL cholesterol (the bad cholesterol). Next, the older types of margarine often contain trans-fat. This type of fat is consider less healthy than saturated fat and should be avoided. It sends your LDL and HDL (the good cholesterol) in the wrong directions. Then there are newer types of margarine that contain primarily unsaturated fat, which is heart healthy and cholesterol friendly. And finally, there are a few newer types of margarine on the market that contain plant sterols or plant stanols. These plant sterols and stanols can be a powerful tool for lowering LDL, so I’d consider one of these if lowering LDL is a priority for you.

**Does the dietitian eat it?**

Truth is that I don’t eat any of these on a regular basis. In my refrigerator, you’ll find spray butter. Why do I choose this and not a newer type margarine? It’s because of the calorie savings of the spray. A handful of sprays on your vegetables at dinner is nearly calorie-free. So for those watching their waistlines, this switch to spray butter is one to consider.

**Eggs**

**What’s the controversy?**

In recent years, news outlets have reported that the dietary cholesterol in egg yolks no longer needs to be limited in our diets. For so long, yolks were to be limited, but not anymore? Is this right?

**What’s the truth?**

The confusion stems from two nutrients in egg yolks, dietary cholesterol and saturated fat. Dietary cholesterol is not as much of a focus as it used to be for those striving to lower their LDL cholesterol levels. This is in part due to dietary cholesterol not driving up LDL as much as we once thought. However, saturated fat, which is in egg yolks, does raise LDL when not eaten in moderation (like we learned when discussing butter). Because egg yolks only contain a moderate amount of saturated fat, eggs as a whole can be a regular part of a healthy diet.
Does the dietitian eat it?
Once again, I don’t eat eggs on a regular basis. In my refrigerator (next to my spray butter) is egg substitute, which is primarily made from egg whites. Because of a family history of heart health issues, I do all that I reasonably can to limit my saturated fat intake. Next time you visit your local grocery store to stock up on eggs, grab a carton of eggs and a carton of egg substitute. Compare the nutrition facts and make your own choice on which to purchase.

Carrots
What’s the controversy?
Carrots have a lot of sugar in them, right?
What’s the truth?
Nope. There isn’t a lot of sugar in carrots. The root of this myth can be tied to the glycemic index. The glycemic index gives a number to how eating 50 grams of carbohydrate from a specific food impacts blood sugar. The problem is that we don’t often eat 50 grams of carbohydrate from carrots in one sitting. As a result, we don’t see the dramatic spike in blood sugar that the glycemic index would suggest. For both those trying to control blood sugar and those trying to lose weight, carrots are a green light. Most fruits and vegetables are. Go for it. Enjoy!

Does the dietitian eat it?
Absolutely! My favorite ways to eat carrots are roasted in the oven, cut up on salad, and dipped in a lite salad dressing.

Bread
What’s the controversy?
Many believe that to lose weight that they’ve got to cut out bread from their diets.
What’s the truth?
For a while, low carbohydrate diets were popular. They popularized the misconception that eating bread is counterproductive for weight loss. Eating too many calories from any source and burning too few calories is what is truly counterproductive for weight loss and overall health. Like most other foods, eating a moderate amount of bread daily can easily fit into a successful weight loss plan.

Does the dietitian eat it?
For me, it’s about the type of bread. I eat almost exclusively whole grain breads. The extra fiber and other beneficial vitamins and minerals in whole grains are what I’m after. The extra fiber can help lower cholesterol, maintain bowel regularity, steady blood sugar levels, and enhance the feeling of fullness. To spot a whole grain, here’s one easy trick. The first ingredient on the ingredient list should say ‘whole.’ If it doesn’t, it’s likely going to say ‘enriched,’ which sounds good, but isn’t as good as whole grain.

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