

4-23-10 The Egg and I

It's been a long time since I thought about the nutritional value of eggs. In college nutrition classes, the egg was the perfect protein, containing all nine essential amino acids. Against it, all other proteins are compared. It's more than just a great source of protein, though. The egg is "nutrient dense", packing in a significant supply of vitamins A, D, E, B1, B2, B12, folate, calcium, phosphorous, magnesium, iron and zinc. Eggs are a good source of choline and inositol, members of the B vitamin family, which we need for nerve transmission and brain function and are difficult to get from diet alone. Then there's lecithin, an important phospholipid, helping our cells walls, nerve membranes and liver function. Those little chicks certainly are well fed.

It only makes sense, doesn't it, that the egg would be the perfect food. It is, after all, what the developing chick is completely dependent on. The egg can only be as good as the hen's diet, though. Chemical feed, lack of variety in the diet and lack of fresh air and exercise, result in a just-getting-by-hen, with little to spare for the production of eggs. They are, after all, complex living beings, just like us, needing pretty much the same things: a healthy diet with a variety of fresh foods, exercise and some fun.

Fresh eggs from free range hens eating a healthy diet of grass and bugs along with their grain, are as healthy as the diet that produced them. If you have never had the pleasure of eating fresh eggs from healthy well-fed chickens, you'll notice the difference the moment you crack it open. Even the act of cracking is noticeable, with the shell thicker and stronger. The well nourished, fresh egg yolk is near orange in color and tastes great compared to the yellow store bought yolks.

So, why does the egg get a bad rap? It's that word, "cholesterol", isn't it? In a society more concerned with looks than health, any kind of fat is considered bad. So, many of us heard the "F" word and ran the other way! Stop running and come back and listen. We need balance, in life and in our diet, and that means we need some fat. That's right. We need some. We need those good choices, like the polyunsaturated ones and those with the Omega 3's. And eggs, along with fatty fish and nuts, are a good source of it. We can't produce this on our own, either. We have to eat it to get it.

The big bad fat to avoid is the Trans-fat. They result from the food industry adding hydrogen to vegetable oils to make them last longer. Eggs don't have any trans-fats. None. Not even from chickens eating French fries and donuts. That's just not how it works.

Eggs do have a low amount of saturated fat but, remember, we need some fat in our diets. While we are considering the idea of allowing ourselves to eat some saturated fats, from healthy sources such as eggs, consider that I could not find any evidence of egg consumption raising the level of cholesterol in the blood stream. Lots of studies showed no difference at all between groups eating no eggs and the other group eating one or two eggs a day, seven days a week. In

fact, our body needs fat so desperately, that when we don't provide it in our diet, our liver will produce it. Let's face it, our body wants to survive and modern mankind has drifted so far away from natural and healthy toward a chemical filled, contrived lifestyle, that we don't always know what we're doing. We react to hyped up headlines, restrict our diet and our body reacts right back.

Nutrition is a complicated topic, though, and over simplified headlines just don't do justice to the topic. Even the American Heart Association over simplifies on their fun website. They have some cute cartoon characters, including The Bad Fats brothers, Sat and Trans, with the warning, "Don't let them break your heart."

See how Sat is right there with his brother's bad reputation, though? A precaution against too much is not the same as the warning that something is poison and to be avoided completely. That's the difference between these two. We can eat some saturated fats from natural sources. We should not eat any hydrogenated fats (now called trans fats).

Return, Sat, our prodigal son. We need you after all and we understand you better now. Your brother, that's another story. As the therapist has suggested, we love him but not what he does.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. She finds it challenging to help people who complain about the noise of chickens but finds it easy to eat the eggs of healthy happy poultry. On her reading list is "Cholesterol Myths" by Dr. Uffe Ravnskov. If you have any scientific evidence about levels of cholesterol in fresh vs. stale eggs and well fed vs. not so well fed chickens, please contact her at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us