

Should You Be Eating Lard?

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Lard @ss, tub of lard, lardo.

With insults like these now part of our social vernacular, it's no wonder lard has gotten such a bad rap. The word isn't just synonymous with fat—it actually *is* fat, or pork fat culled from the area surrounding a pig's stomach and rendered for use in cooking. All in all, sounds like a heart attack waiting to happen or 5 pounds of instant weight gain, right?

Not so fast. Recently, lard has come back into fashion and become a fat of choice for many nutritionists, Paleo dieters, and hordes of famous chefs, including the Food Network's Alton Brown, who proclaimed lard to be the best cooking fat ever. So, is it time to eat lard?

While there are a few dissenters in the ranks, most of the experts we spoke with say lard doesn't deserve its bad rap—and can actually be a healthier fat than other options, especially for some kinds of cooking.

But wait. Isn't lard full of the saturated fat that doctors warn can clog up your arteries? Well, not really. Saturated fat makes up only about 40% of the fat in lard and actually isn't as bad for your health as doctors used to think. In fact, many experts now argue that eating saturated fat is good for overall health. Recent studies have found that eating more saturated fat doesn't increase the risk of heart disease at all, while some studies show it can raise good HDL cholesterol and lower the risk of heart disease when combined with a low-carb or low-sugar diet.

Besides, lard is lower in saturated fat than other animal fats like butter and tallow, and higher in heart-healthy monounsaturated fat—the type that gives olive oil its health halo. Lard is made up of 50% monounsaturated fat—compare that to only 32% in butter and 6% in coconut oil. Plus, in its natural form, lard has none of the trans fats that we *know* are bad for you.

When you cook with lard, you get the bonus of adding extra vitamin D to your diet, something no other cooking oil (except butter) can boast. "You basically have a vitamin D supplement built into your fat," says Lily Nichols, RDN, CDE, CLT. A tablespoon of lard from a pasture-raised pig has about 1,000 IU of vitamin D, according to Nichols. By comparison, 1 tablespoon of butter has 9 IU of vitamin D, while the same amount of olive oil has none. In fact, lard is one of the highest dietary sources of vitamin D—a nutrient in which about 42% of U.S. adults are deficient.

Because lard contains more saturated fat than veggie oils, it doesn't go rancid as quickly and has a higher smoke point, making it better for frying and high-heat cooking. "The chemical makeup of saturated fats is very stable," Nichols says. "Unsaturated fats like those found in vegetable oils, on the other hand, tend to go bad and change structure the longer they cook." This means oils like canola, corn, or olive cooked at a high heat or used repeatedly (like in restaurant fry cookers) can start to break down and release free radicals, which then lead to inflammation.

If that's not enough to convince you, lard also just makes things taste better—there's a reason your grandma used it in everything from pies to scrambled eggs. "Lard is the fat that has the largest crystals, so it's going to make things like tamales and pastries the fluffiest and flakiest," says Zarela Martinez, a chef who owned one of New York City's arguably most authentic Mexican restaurants for 23 years. "There's no comparison in cooking beans with lard and cooking them with oil."

With all these benefits, are there any cons to consuming lard? Some experts still believe it's important to watch your saturated fat intake, as dairy and meat, even from pasture-raised animals, contain cholesterol. "I don't want to see people go back to using all of these solid fats, as it goes against current guidelines and recommendations," says Penny Kris-Etherton, former president of the National Lipids Association. "It's just not healthy to eat solid fats."

According to the 2010 USDA dietary guidelines she cites, getting more than 7% of your calories from saturated fat increases the risk for high cholesterol and heart disease, even though more recent research suggests this is not the case.

That aside, if you're ready to add lard to your diet, there's an important caveat to its health benefits: Lard that's sold solid at room temperature and doesn't need to be refrigerated *does* contain trans fat and likely less of the good-for-you vitamin D. Plus, it's not nearly as good for cooking, according to Martinez, who says commercial lard is "like poison."

Instead, consider making your own lard, which is easy to do, says Jennifer McLagan, chef and author of [*Fat: An Appreciation of a Misunderstood Ingredient*](#). She suggests either asking your butcher for back fat or leaf lard or getting a pasture-raised, organic cut of pork like bacon or pork belly and rendering it at home, which is as simple as slicing off the fat, cutting it up, and cooking it low and slow on the stove or in your oven.