

Avocados: A Fattening Fruit or Nutritional Edge?

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Many a time I have had a client tell me that they avoid avocados like the plague because they are “loaded with fat”. Yet before you skip the guacamole for good, consider that this Central American fruit (and yes, it is a fruit, not a vegetable) is by no means a nutritional bugaboo; in fact, it ranks highly on the nutrition scale.

While it is true that the creamy texture of avocado comes from a high fat content (avocados are 79 percent fat), a closer look at the numbers tells a healthier tale: one-quarter cup of avocado cubes weighs in at 60 calories, 4 grams of heart healthy unsaturated fat, and less than one gram of saturated fat. Hands down, this makes avocados a better choice than artery clogging creamy alternatives like cream cheese, mayo or butter. For comparison, consider that 2 tablespoons of lightly salted butter packs over 200 calories and 23 grams of total fat, 14 of them saturated.

Health experts are slowly educating the public that not all fats are created equal when it comes to health. Under the new Dietary Guidelines for Americans issued last May, avocado was listed as a healthy addition to a diet along with other unsaturated fats like olives, seeds, nuts and fatty fish. This means that, from a health perspective, it's a green light on this green fruit.

Aside from it being one of the top shelf fats when it comes to the “creaminess factor”, as an added plus avocados are one of the most nutrient dense foods. This means that you get a strong nutrition “bang for your buck” along with those calories. Not only are they rich in folate, fiber and magnesium, but ounce for ounce avocados trump bananas when it comes to potassium.

Yet avocados can boast more than just their healthy fat profile. Recent research has shown that avocados contain 4 x the amount of beta-sisterol than other fruits such as bananas, apples or cantaloupe. Beta-sisterol is a plant compound that has been shown to block the absorption of cholesterol from the intestinal track, and may actually help to lower existing cholesterol levels in the body.

They also score high points in this new nutrition era of phytochemicals and antioxidants. For starters, they are rich in antioxidant vitamins C and E, which help protect cells from oxidative damage and free radicals. Avocados are also rich in glutathione, one more strange sounding but very important word in the promotion of DNA and cellular health. Still not convinced? Avocados are rich in lutein, a phytochemical that can help protect against prostate cancer, macular degeneration and cataracts.



Yet while their high nutrition score is clear, avocados still can pack on the calories in a relatively small amount. While this makes it a great addition for athletes, growing children, people looking to maintain their weight or even gain weight, it can be a yellow light for people watching their waistlines. If you are trying to limit total calories watch your avocado portions just as you would any high calorie food. Use avocado in cubes or slices rather than spreads or dips, as one quarter cup of pureed avocado contains about 93 calories and 9 grams of total fat, a significant calorie difference from the same amount of cubes. But don't let that keep you from incorporating this uberfruit into your diet; here are some ways to reap avocados' nutritional benefits.

- Use avocado in lieu of cream cheese, butter, cheese or mayo on sandwiches and burgers.
- Make a healthy snack dip by blending equal parts mashed avocado with salsa; serve with baked tortilla chips or veggie sticks.
- Choose guacamole at Mexican restaurants, skipping the heart stopping sour cream or cheese options.
- Place wedges of avocado in salads for added nutrition.
- Visit the California Avocado Commission website for more information on storage suggestions and recipe ideas at www.avocado.org.

Avocado Mandarin Salad (makes 4 Servings)

- 1 package (10 oz) mixed salad greens
- 1 can (15 oz) mandarin oranges, well drained
- 1 package (6 oz) cooked and sliced chicken
- 2 thin slices red onion, quartered
- one- quarter cup pecans, toated
- one- half cup light Italian or balsamic vinegar dressing
- 2 ripe avocados, seeded, peeled, and cut into chunks

1. In a large bowl combine salad greens, oranges, chicken and pecans. Set aside.
2. In a small bowl combine dressing with one half cup avocado cubes. Mash and blend into dressing.
3. Add remaining avocado cubes and dressing to salad. Toss and serve immediately

Nutrition Information per Serving:

- 360 calories
- 18 grams protein
- 30 grams carbohydrate
- 21 grams of fat (4 grams saturated, 12 grams monounsaturated, 5 grams polyunsaturated)
- 35 milligrams cholesterol
- 10 grams fiber
- 510 milligrams sodium

Recipe Source: American Dietetic Association, Nutrition Fact Sheet, “Avocados Contribute to a Healthy Lifestyle”, 2000.