

Pork and Lard: How To Choose Healthy Versions

Bacon is the nutritional equivalent of cigarettes it seems. *Deep-fried in lard?* You might as well be serving up a shot of cholesterol. Ham, sausage, and other pork products have been also relegated to the “bad” category. Sadly, we have been misguided. Depending on the source of the product and your **constitutional type**, pork products may be beneficial to your health.

Consider this: Pork is the most widely consumed meat on the planet. On Okinawa, an island off the coast of Japan, inhabitants enjoy the world’s longest lifespan. Okinawans eat pork regularly and cook their food in lard.

The French, among the top three longest-lived people of the world, are well known for their generous use of lard. Almandine, a petite gourmet French chef who once gave me cooking lessons, produced a package of lardoons (small chunks of lard for cooking) our first class, indicating it to be indispensable to good cooking.

Pork: When It Is Good

Pork is an excellent source of high quality protein and B-vitamins. Chinese medicine considers pork beneficial to certain **constitutional types** and therapeutic for some conditions. It is *moistening* and thus tends to be most beneficial to those with **dry signs**, characterized by dry skin and mucous membranes, a thin body type, red cheeks, cravings for sweets, constipation or dry stools, and/or advancing age.

On the other hand, those who are overweight and retain fluids, or develop mucous, such as in respiratory conditions, should consume pork sparingly, or not at all. As with any food, pork can be disease-producing in excess for any constitution, or when processed in certain ways.

Pork: When it is Bad

Standard supermarket pork is the factory variety. Large commercial farms use breeds that produce the most meat with the least fat at the lowest cost. Animals are raised in tiny boxes on concrete floors. The goal is quantity, not quality. Pigs are often fed fellow pigs, chicken or other animal byproducts as well as potentially melamine-contaminated pet food, antibiotics and growth hormone enhancers. Antibiotics fight infection rampant in pigs raised in unhealthy conditions. Growth hormone enhancers boost weight and lean tissue of pigs for profits. Residues of both can end up in the final product and potentially impact your own immunity and hormones.

Special breeding has brought us far leaner pork options than we had 25 years ago. Do we need such an abnormally low-fat “white meat”? Leaner pork is not associated with weight loss or improvements in health. Obesity and diabetes rates have tripped in the past 20 years, the same period our fat intake dropped by nearly 25 percent. Fats are needed to absorb nutrients, balance blood sugars and insulin, nourish our skin and to enable us to make the right hormones.

Pork can also cause health problems when processed in certain ways. The curing process, for example, requires the use of lots of salt, as well as nitrites, chemicals known to increase digestive cancers and, in children, leukemia. Cured pork also contains sugar, an additive most of us should be cutting back on, not adding to our savory foods. Pork chops and roasts, uncured ham and bacon, prosciutto and other uncured pork products make healthier choices than cured products.

Choose Traditional Pork

If you want healthy and better-tasting pork, choose traditional and/or *certified humane raised* pork. Just as with **beef** or **poultry**, the feed, breed and living conditions of the animals impact the final healthfulness and safety of the meat, not to mention quality of life for the animal. *Certified humane raised and handled* or traditional pork insures your meat is coming from animals allowed to live outdoors and eat their natural diet, which reduces disease and the need for drugs while improving the nutritional value of the meat. For more, go to www.certifiedhumane.com.

Traditional and humane raised pork is more likely free of dangerous antibiotics as well as drug-resistant bacteria. It is also free of growth hormone enhancer residues.

Another benefit of traditional pork is you are helping to support pig breeds facing extinction. Since the 1930's, six out of 16 breeds of pigs raised in the U.S. have become extinct. It is unfortunate for the animals as well as for those of us who appreciate a diversity of animal life, food sources and food flavors.

See Shopping Guide for high quality sources of pork products.

Traditional Pork Flavor

The general consensus is that traditionally raised pork is richer in flavor than modern, low-fat, conventional factory-raised versions. It is more heavily marbled, darker, juicier and more tender. As with grass-fed meats, pork flavor varies with the diet and breed of the animals as well as their care and region in which they are raised.

When Lard is Good and Vegetable Oil is Bad

A close look at lard reveals that when not processed (not hydrogenated), it isn't so bad for us, and in fact is a better choice for cooking than its modern replacement: hydrogenated vegetable oils. Lard contains 39 percent saturated fat, that's less than that of butter, which is 60 percent saturated. Lard contains more monounsaturated fat than it does saturated fat. This makes lard more akin to the amazingly heart-healthy, cancer-fighting, anti-aging oil from olives. Of the saturated fats lard does contain, 35 percent are stearic acid, the kind that reduces cholesterol absorption, lowers undesirable LDL cholesterol, and makes blood less sticky, a combination of benefits not even offered by modern drugs.

By let's take a little side trip into the world of arteries. Plaque is not a big wad of lard and butter. It is made up of smooth muscle cells, connective tissue, white blood cells, and fat.

Of the fat in plaque, 74 percent is unsaturated, the kind in vegetable oil! (*Lancet*, 1994;344:1195) Sounds to me like we should be cutting back on our corn oil, not the lard.

Analysis of the fat portion of artery plaques found the higher the concentration of omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids (think corn, sunflower, safflower, soybean, and grape seed oils and grain-fed meat...), the more likely they are to rupture. (*Atheroscler Throm Vasc Biol*, 1997;17:1337-1345)

The right level of saturated fats is critical to health. A Harvard research team found that postmenopausal women with existing coronary heart disease who consumed the most saturated fat had the least narrowing of their arteries, in other words, the least amount of plaque. The intake of polyunsaturated fats was associated with *increased* plaque. (*Am Jr of Clinical Nutrition*, 2004; 80:1175-1184)

Unfortunately, the lard once used in the frying vats of most restaurants has been replaced by partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, or trans fats, a fat the National Academy of Sciences says we shouldn't be eating at all. "The only safe intake of trans fats is zero," says the NAS. No research has ever come to that conclusion with lard. On top of that, your fries and nuggets soak up twice as much fat when cooked in vegetable oils as in lard.

But what about all those studies showing saturated fat kills us? Harvard School of Public Health researcher Walter Willet takes trans fats out of the saturated fat studies and finds saturated fat from animal sources does not cause cancer and heart disease as originally thought but rather it was the margarine and shortening that skewed the data. (*Society for Epidemiology Research*, June 1992, Annual Meeting, Abstract 249)

The final insult is the sacrifice in taste and texture with lard-replacements. Don't we care about taste? Lard, not vegetable oil, is well-known to offer up the flakiest and most tender of piecrusts and the crispiest, most perfectly flavored French fries. Choose leaf lard, the highest quality. Be sure to render it.

Having been raised in southern California, I developed a passion for Mexican food at an early age. When I was a child, Mexican food restaurants served up traditional lard-fried food. It was delicious. Ultra crispy, light chips came from vats of hot lard. Beans were lard-refried. Sadly, lard has now been replaced in many Mexican restaurants with corn oil, or worse, shortening made of trans fats. Next time you go out for Mexican food, ask what kind of fat your chips or beans are fried in. Let them know you want traditional lard.

Questions for your butcher or grocer.

1. How was the animal raised?
2. How much time did it spend outdoors each day?
3. What was the hog fed?
4. Was it given antibiotics or hormones?

