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While fitness professionals often attempt to assign a certain percentage of importance to nutrition relative to fat loss progress, one thing on which everyone agrees is that it's no secret that what you eat—or don't eat—has a major impact on your success in achieving your body transformation goals.

With that in mind, we want to supply you a list of 15 of the BEST foods that fight belly fight. You'll find that these foods are rich in certain nutrients that boost the metabolism, accelerate your ability to burn fat, improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your fat burning hormones, satiate your appetite, support your calorie-burning fat free mass, and more.

If you base the majority (i.e., 80 – 90%) of your diet on the following foods—as well as those in similar categories—you will be well on your way to achieving your body composition goals.

**Green Tea**

If your goals are to lose fat and add calorie-burning lean muscle mass—and who doesn’t want to do that—then, besides plain, filtered water, your beverage of choice should be green tea. According to researchers, *Camellia sinensis*, which is the plant species whose leaves and buds are used in the production of tea, exerts several “anti-obesity effects.” (1)
Although various types of teas (e.g., oolong, black, green) all come from the *Camellia sinensis* plant, green tea leaves are processed (i.e., fermented) differently, which leaves them with a higher concentration of beneficial polyphenols called catechins, and it’s these compounds, which also have noteworthy anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, along with green tea’s naturally-occurring caffeine that seem to have quite a potent effect on the metabolism and helping reduce body fat.

Specifically, green tea extracts standardized for the catechin epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG) and caffeine have been shown to increase the rate of fat oxidation (i.e., fat burning) at rest and during exercise. In one study, subjects that took a green tea extract, which contained both caffeine and EGCG, three times per day increased both thermogenesis (i.e., metabolic rate) and fat oxidation over the course of 24 hours. (2) The authors stated that the effect was superior to that witnessed by caffeine alone.

Subsequently, researchers have found that consumption of a green tea extract prior to exercise increased the amount of fat burned during the bout of training. (3) What’s more, the researchers also noted improvements in blood sugar management and insulin sensitivity. Overall, researchers have concluded, “A green tea-caffeine mixture improves weight maintenance, through thermogenesis, fat oxidation, and sparing fat free mass.” (4)

In addition to an increased metabolic rate, heightened fat oxidation, and improved blood sugar and insulin sensitivity, green tea consumption has also been found to decrease appetite and help regulate blood triglycerides. Researchers suggest consumption of 2 – 4 cups (i.e., 500mL – 1L) of green tea per day to reap these fat-burning and health promoting benefits. (5)

**Grass-Fed Beef**

Beef is loaded with protein, and when it comes to fighting the battle of the bulge, there is likely not a more important nutrient than protein. As a matter of fact, researchers suggest that an increased protein
intake may be one of the single most important dietary and lifestyle changes that one can make as part of an effective weight loss strategy.

Specifically, there are multiple potential beneficial outcomes associated with an increased protein intake: (6)

1. Increased satiety: Protein-rich foods induce a greater sense of satisfaction than fat- or carbohydrate-rich foods, and they may even decrease energy intake in subsequent meals;
2. Increased thermogenesis: Dietary protein exerts a significantly higher “thermic effect” than fats or carbohydrates, and high-protein diets have continuously been shown to boost the metabolism (i.e., increase energy expenditure); and
3. Maintenance or building of fat free mass (FFM) and preservation of metabolic rate: High-protein diets have continuously been shown to preserve FFM when dieting for fat loss, and they have also been shown to be necessary for the preservation of metabolic rate, which is frequently compromised as a result of dieting. (7)

Clearly, then, one of the single most important dietary factors that you can do to support your fat loss goals is boost your protein intake. As mentioned, beef is a great source of protein, as well as the following essential nutrients:

- Vitamin B12
- Selenium
- Zinc
- Niacin
- Vitamin B6
- Phosphorus
- Choline
- Iron
- Riboflavin
Obviously, despite a bad rap in certain circles, beef is a nutrient-dense, fat-fighting all-star. However, not all beef is created equally, and grass-feed beef is a superior option over standard grain-fed options.

Interestingly, regardless of whether your beef is grain-fed or grass-fed, you’ll be getting about 40-50% saturated fat, about 40-50% monounsaturated fat, and somewhere near 10% polyunsaturated fat. However, and this is a BIG however, the diet of the cow significantly influences the types of each fat present.

Depending on the breed of cow, grass-fed beef contains between 2 and 5 times more Omega-3 fatty acids than grain-fed beef. The average ratio of Omega-6 to Omega-3 Fatty Acids in grass-fed beef is 1.5:1, which is essentially ideal. On the contrary, in grain-fed beef, this ratio jumps all the way up to nearly 8:1.

This is important to note for a plethora of reasons, but succinctly put, this type of Omega Imbalance, which is characterized by excessive consumption of Omega-6 fatty acids coupled with a deficiency in Omega-3 fatty acids, is connected to an increase in all inflammatory diseases, which is basically all diseases, including:

- Cardiovascular disease
- Type 2 diabetes
- Obesity
- Metabolic syndrome
- Irritable bowel syndrome and inflammatory bowel disease
- Macular degeneration
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Asthma
- Psychiatric disorders
- Autoimmune disease

What’s more, this overconsumption of Omega-6 fatty acids not only affects you but also your offspring, as it can increase the incidence of obesity in future generations.
In addition to a much healthier Omega-3 fatty acid profile, grass-fed beef is one of the best dietary sources of conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), as it contains an average of 2 to 3 times more CLA than grain-fed beef. CLA possesses significant antioxidant activity, and research has shown it to reduce body fat, increase lean body mass, and improve body composition. (11)

Cage-Free Pasture-Raised Eggs

Based on that previous section, you now realize how important that protein-rich foods are to support your fat loss goals. In addition to grass-fed beef, cage-free whole eggs should be at the top of your list.

In addition to packing 7 grams of metabolism-boosting protein, a single egg is also loaded with several critical nutrients, including:

- Choline, which supports brain health and nervous system function;
- Lutein and zeaxanthin, which are potent antioxidants that fight free radicals and help prevent macular degeneration;
- Vitamin A;
- Vitamin D;
- Selenium;
- Phosphorus;
- Potassium;
- And more.

That being said, just like there are differences between beef from grass-fed and grain-fed animals, not all eggs are created equally from a nutrition standpoint. Specifically, research from Mother Earth News, suggests that eggs from cage-free pasture-raised hens provide a drastically improved nutrition profile than standard store-bought eggs. (12)
For example, compared to typical supermarket eggs, the eggs from pasture-raised hens may contain:

- 1/3 less cholesterol
- 1/4 less saturated fat
- 2/3 more vitamin A
- 2 times more Omega-3 fatty acids
- 3 times more vitamin E
- 6 times more vitamin D
- 7 times more beta-carotene

Because the lines are somewhat blurry on the definitions of cage-free and pasture-raised, it may be beneficial to do some additional research on the egg producers. Better yet, your best bet may be to attend a local farmer’s market and purchase certified organic eggs from cage-free, pasture-raised hens.

Since eggs are synonymous with breakfast, this is as good a time as any to remind you to include protein at breakfast. Research suggests that the satiety effects of a high-protein breakfast will have far-reaching implications on your appetite and waistline.

In a recent study, researchers from the University of Missouri found that people who ate a high-protein breakfast (e.g., eggs and lean beef) felt more full, had fewer cravings, and were less likely to snack on high-fat and high-sugar foods at night, compared with a group who ate a calorically equivalent bowl of cereal. (13)

Multiple other studies comparing a high-protein breakfast (e.g., 30+ grams of protein) to a breakfast of ready-to-eat cereal have also shown similar benefits in satiety, appetite, hormonal responses, and subsequent food choices. (14, 15)

**Plain Organic Greek Yogurt**

If the benefits of a high-protein diet have not yet been extolled upon you, please allow
us the opportunity to remind you that a diet rich in high-quality protein has well-established scientific support as a successful strategy to promote weight loss and weight management in adults, as high-protein diets have regularly been shown to result in greater losses in fat mass, maintenance or building of fat free mass, improved body composition, and preservation of metabolic rate when dieting. (16)

Along these lines, high-protein meals increase satiety and boost the metabolism. (17) For those reasons, you can add plain Greek yogurt to your list of fat-fighting foods. Greek yogurt contains more than double the protein of regular yogurt and only about one-third the amount of sugar.

What’s more, authentic strained Greek yogurt is rich in multiple sources of probiotics. Research indicates that the gut flora (i.e., the bacterial ecosystem) of obese folks differs significantly from that of thin people. (16) Along these lines, recent research published in the British Journal of Nutrition suggests that certain probiotics from the Lactobacillus family of bacteria, which are prominent in Greek yogurt, may help you lose weight and keep it off. (19)

When choosing a Greek yogurt, we recommend that you opt for plain versions, as fruit-flavored varieties have over three times as much added sugar. Instead, add some fresh fruit (e.g., berries), which will provide a nutrient-dense source of fiber, vitamins, antioxidants, and polyphenols.

In addition, we recommend that you choose organic sources of Greek yogurt and other forms of dairy whenever possible. Similar to the discussion regarding grass-fed beef, organic dairy has a significantly different fatty acid profile when compared to conventional dairy.
Specifically, studies comparing organic to conventional have reported that organic dairy contains: (20)

- 25% fewer Omega-6 fatty acids, which are pro-inflammatory;
- 62% more Omega-3 fatty acids, which are anti-inflammatory;
- 2.5 times lower Omega-6 to Omega-3 fatty acid ratio, which is much closer to optimal;
- 32% more EPA and 19% more DHA, which are two Omega-3 fatty acids crucial for nervous system function, cardiovascular health, pain management, hormonal regulation, body composition, feelings of well being, and more; and
- 18% more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which has been shown to reduce body fat, increase lean body mass, and improve body composition. (11)

### Wild-Caught, Fatty Fish

Wild-caught, cold-water fish like salmon, sardines, anchovies, mackerel, halibut, and tuna are rife with protein and Omega-3 fatty acids. In addition to their brain and cardiovascular health benefits, these essential fats have been shown to have beneficial effects on metabolism and body composition.

Researchers from Gettysburg College found that supplementation with fish oils, which supply the same types of Omega-3 fatty acids found in fatty fish like salmon, for 6 weeks significantly increased fat free mass and decreased fat mass. (21) What’s more, the subjects also experienced increased metabolic rate and significantly decreased levels of cortisol, a stress hormone associated with increased abdominal fat storage. (22)

Researchers from Australia recently found similar impressive results as they combined Omega-3 fatty acids supplementation with a specific weight loss diet. The scientists found that subjects with higher Omega-3 fatty acid intakes lost significantly more fat.
than the subjects who did not supplement with the essential fats despite the fact that both groups followed the same diet protocol. (23)

One concern with fish intake is the potential heavy metal and purity issues that are common with the modern fish supply. What's more, there are some ethical concerns regarding mislabeling of fish. Specifically, a recent study conducted by the world’s largest ocean conservation group, Oceana, revealed that nearly half of the fish being sold in the United States are actually less expensive, potentially harmful fish that have been deliberately mislabeled as a higher quality, more sought-after fish. (24)

With these things in mind, you'll want to make sure that you ask questions and only purchase these fish from a trusted market/supplier, who can confirm that they are precisely as marked. If you can find a source you trust, these fish indeed possess some fat-fighting benefits.

**Broccoli and Other Cruciferous Vegetables**

Cruciferous vegetables may have more fat-fighting and health-boosting benefits than nearly any other family of vegetables. On top of that, there are so many options from which to choose, including:

- Broccoli
- Kale
- Cauliflower
- Brussels Sprouts
- Rutabaga
- Cabbage
- Bok Choy
- Swiss Chard
- Turnips
- Arugula
- Collard Greens
• Watercress
• Radishes

Cruciferous vegetables are high in fiber, and simply put, fiber is a nutrition all-star, as it promotes satiety, a healthy digestive tract, regularity, cardiovascular health, and many other health and body composition benefits. In fact, researchers have linked low fiber intakes to increased risk for diabetes and obesity. What’s more, scientists continuously demonstrate that diets higher in fiber help with weight loss and weight management.

One unique benefit of cruciferous vegetables is their ability to fight off dietary and environmental estrogens to which you may be exposed to through soy, plastics, and pesticides via a special phytonutrient called indole-3-carbinol (I3C). Environmental estrogens have also been linked to high levels of belly fat; thus, by consuming more cruciferous vegetables you’ll be fighting off belly fat stores at the same time.

Even beyond the above two benefits, a recent study published in the renowned journal Nature Immunology discovered that specific proteins in cruciferous vegetables may play an essential role in gut health by boosting immune cell production and ultimately combating bacterial infections, chronic inflammation, and potentially even bowel cancer. What’s more, these same immune cells may also help lower food sensitivities and control obesity.

Cruciferous vegetables have also been shown through research to boast antioxidant and anti-aging properties. In fact, one study funded by the National Cancer Institute showed that participants who consumed 1 - 2 cups of cruciferous vegetables a day reduced their oxidative stress by 22% in just 3 weeks.
Spinach

*Popeye’s* super strength came from eating spinach, and the creators of that famous cartoon really did know what they were talking about. Spinach is arguably one of the most nutrient-dense foods you can find, as it is loaded with essential vitamins and minerals and phytonutrients.

As a matter of fact, spinach is an excellent source of:

- Vitamin K
- Vitamin A, including several powerful antioxidants (i.e., carotenoids)
- Manganese
- Folate
- Magnesium
- Iron
- Copper
- Vitamin B2
- Vitamin B6
- Vitamin E
- Calcium
- Potassium
- Vitamin C
- Fiber
- Phosphorus
- Vitamin B1
- Zinc
- Choline

With that laundry list of essential nutrients, it’s easy to see why this “superfood” would be at the top of anyone’s list trying to lose fat and promote a healthy lifestyle. In addition
to these micronutrients, spinach is also a rich source of phytonutrients and antioxidants, like the carotenoids lutein, zeaxanthin, neoxanthin, and violaxanthin.

These phytonutrients and antioxidants all work incredibly hard against inflammation, which makes spinach a highly anti-inflammatory food. Along these lines, the research is becoming abundantly clear that inflammation plays a major role in obesity and vice versa. (32) Thus, including potent anti-inflammatory foods like spinach in your nutrition arsenal is critical in the battle of the bulge.

What’s more, all of these nutrients come at a very low price, calorically speaking. As a matter of fact, a single cup of spinach contains only 7 calories. Thus, you can load your plate, smoothie, or omelet with this nutrient-dense super-star with literally no regard for the calories.

**Mixed Berries**

Berries like blackberries, blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries are nutrient-dense, and they are high in both water and fiber, which can help keep you full. What’s more, they’re naturally sweet, which will help satisfy your sweet tooth, and they are low glycemic, which will help you manage your blood sugar and insulin levels.

The health benefits of berries, with their dark pigments indicative of their rich polyphenol content, have been demonstrated in various nutrition studies. Research suggests that these nutritional powerhouses may have cardioprotective effects as well as benefits ranging from aging to metabolic syndrome.

Researchers from Texas Women’s University recently demonstrated that the polyphenols in blueberries may also play a significant role in fighting obesity. Specifically, the researchers found that these compounds inhibited the formation of fat cells. (33)
What’s more, researchers from New Zealand found that consumption of blueberries may also accelerate muscle recovery when combined with intense exercise. Specifically, subjects who consumed a blueberry smoothie before and after exercise experienced reduced muscle soreness and accelerated recovery of strength, which all adds up to more frequent and more intense training sessions and improved performance. (34)

Anthocyanins, the colorful antioxidant pigments that give berries their red, blue, and purple hues, are well-known for their wide-ranging health effects, including their abilities to help manage blood sugar and improve insulin signaling. Specifically, cyanidin 3-glucoside (C3G), which is a member of the anthocyanin family, has been shown to attenuate insulin resistance and ameliorate high blood sugar, both of which have major implications for combatting obesity and enhancing fat loss. (35, 36)

What’s more, anthocyanins have been shown to have a unique effect on fat cells (i.e., adipocytes), which has led authors to state that they may play an intricate role in the prevention of metabolic syndrome. As a matter of fact, researchers investigating the effects of anthocyanins on adipocyte function concluded, “Anthocyanins have a significant potency of antiobesity and ameliorate adipocyte function” and they also have “important implications for preventing metabolic syndrome.” (37)

From a fat loss and weight management standpoint, that sounds berry good to us!

**Bananas**

Are you surprised to see this here? Typically you’ll see bananas on a list of foods *not* to eat when it comes to fat loss. If you banish this fruit, you may be missing out on some very important fat-burning nutrients.

In addition to being a rich source of potassium, bananas are also a very good source of the following essential nutrients:
• Vitamin B6
• Vitamin C
• Fiber
• Manganese
• Biotin
• Copper

Of particular note, bananas are one of the best sources of resistant starch, which is a special type of carbohydrate that is not digested by the human body. (38) Resistant starch is not technically classified as a fiber, although many researchers now believe that it should be. Thus, with nearly 5 grams of resistant starch per banana, the net (i.e., usable) carbohydrate content is actually considerably lower than you may think.

Multiple studies have shown that naturally-occurring resistant starch intake increases satiety and reduces food intake both acutely and in the long-term. (39, 40) Research has also shown that consumption of resistant starch increases fat oxidation (i.e., fat burning). (41) Resistant starch has also been shown to decrease fat storage in adipocytes (i.e., fat cells) and improve insulin sensitivity. (42)

Furthermore, researchers speculate that resistant starch may also increase the thermic effect of feeding, which means that it boosts the metabolism, as well as promote weight loss and preserve fat free mass. (43)

Thus, despite a bad rap, bananas clearly have some fat-burning potential.

**Mixed Beans**

Beans, beans, the magical fruit...the lower your cholesterol? The less you weigh? Perhaps that’s not exactly how one of your favorite childhood rhymes goes, but improved cardiovascular health and lower body weight are typically the result of consuming
these high-fiber, high-protein nutritional powerhouses, which belong to a family of plant-based foods called pulses.

What is a “dietary pulse” you ask? Pulses include all beans, lentils, chickpeas, and peas, and recently, researchers found that eating just one serving daily of pulses can significantly reduce “bad” (i.e., LDL) cholesterol and the risk of heart disease. (44)

Specifically, scientists from throughout Canada and the US reviewed 26 randomized controlled trials that included 1037 people. Despite variation between studies, the researchers found a 5% reduction in low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol in people who ate one serving (i.e., 3/4 cup) of legumes per day. Men had greater reduction in LDL cholesterol than women, perhaps because their diets are poorer, cholesterol levels are higher, and benefit more markedly from a healthier diet.

On that note, Dr. Walter Willet of the Harvard School of Public Health said the study adds new evidence to the health benefits of legumes. In addition to being a “useful summary of the literature on metabolic effects of legume consumption,” Dr. Willet suggested that these benefits would be especially potent when beans or other legumes replace processed foods.

In addition to the cardioprotective benefits, myriad studies have suggested that the addition of legumes to a hypocaloric diet can improve fat loss. In one study, researchers compared a high-protein (HP) diet, a legume-based (L) diet, and a control diet, which were all similar in overall calories. At the end of 8 weeks, the HP and L-based dieters lost a similar amount of weight, which was over 50% more than the subjects following the control diet. (45)

Interestingly, the researchers found that those subjects who followed the HP and L-based diets demonstrated significantly increased mitochondrial oxidation, which, for all intents and purposes, can be viewed as an increase in fat burning and metabolic rate. As a result, the researchers concluded that the increase in mitochondrial oxidation may have accounted for the variability in weight loss despite a similar caloric intake.
Several other studies have demonstrated similar significant decreases in body weight when pulses are added to a reduced-calorie diet. As a matter of fact, researchers from the illustrious Purdue University found that subjects who added just 3 cups per week of beans to their hypocaloric diet lost over twice as much weight as the control group, who also followed an iso-caloric diet (i.e., same amount of calories). After 6 weeks, the legume-eating group had lost over three times as much weight as the control group. (46)

What’s more, an increase in the hormone cholecystokinin (CCK), a gut hormone secreted in response to protein and fat intake that helps to slow gastric emptying and increase satiety, has been reported following bean consumption. (47) Thus, in addition to their high protein and fiber content, dietary pulses may positively influence appetite by stimulating satiety centers in the brain.

Overall, the research is quite clear that adding 3 – 5 cups (per week) of beans to your diet may have some significant beneficial effects on your weight loss as well as your cardiovascular health.

Cold-Pressed Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Most folks are well aware that olive oil is considered to be quite healthy. It is typically touted as being heart-healthy, as it is rife in a type of fat called monounsaturated fats (MUFAs). MUFAs may lower your total cholesterol and low-density lipoprotein (LDL, or “bad”) cholesterol levels. MUFAs may also help normalize blood clotting.

Some research shows that MUFAs from olive oil may also benefit insulin levels and blood sugar control. A recent study that appeared in the journal *Clinical Nutrition* concluded that a higher intake of olive oil, which is rich in oleic acid, decreased insulin resistance. (48) Other studies documenting the health benefits of a Mediterranean Diet, which is
plentiful in olive oil, have alluded to the beneficial effects on blood sugar management.\(^{(49)}\)

Olive oil is rich in a specific MUFA called oleic acid, which seems to have a potent impact on appetite regulation. Researchers from the University of California Irvine found that oleic acid stimulates the production of a compound called oleoylethanolamide (OEA) by the cells of the small intestine.\(^{(50)}\) OEA helps to suppress appetite by activating specific sites in the brain that help to curb hunger. Previously, this group of researchers found that increasing OEA levels reduces appetite, produces weight loss, and lowers blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels.\(^{(51)}\)

In addition, olive oil seems to possess potent anti-inflammatory actions, which further help you fight the battle of the bulge. Olive oil is naturally abundant in a polyphenol called oleocanthal, which has some very impressive and unique benefits in reducing inflammation. Specifically, it is a naturally-occurring non-steroidal anti-inflammatory that inhibits activity of cyclooxygenase (COX) enzymes.\(^{(52)}\) If this sounds familiar, it’s because it shares that property with the highly-recognizable over-the-counter drug ibuprofen.

**Avocados**

Also know as the “Alligator Pear,” the avocado is a climacteric fruit, which means that it matures on the tree but ripens off of it. Like olive oil, the avocado is full of MUFAs, including the appetite-satiating oleic acid.

A nutrient-dense fruit, avocados contain upwards of 20 essential nutrients, which are crucial to optimizing your health and stoking your fat-burning furnace, including fiber, vitamin K, folate, vitamin B6, vitamin C, vitamin E, pantothenic acid, potassium, riboflavin, and niacin.

According to research recently published in the *Nutrition Journal*, eating some avocado
with a meal significantly improves satisfaction and may reduce your desire to snack in the hours after eating. Specifically, researchers found that participants who consumed one-half of an avocado with their lunch reported a 40% decreased desire to eat during the three hours after their lunch and a 28% decreased desire to eat 5 hours after.

What’s more, the authors of the study noted improved blood sugar management in the group that consumed avocado with their lunch, which suggests that avocados may help regulate blood sugar levels, another very important factor when trying to lose fat.

Observational studies suggest that regular avocado consumption is associated with better diet quality and nutrient intake and lower incidence of metabolic syndrome. In another study published in the *Nutrition Journal*, scientists found that people who ate avocados were more likely to have a lower body weight, body mass index (BMI), and waist circumference.

**Raw, Unsalted Mixed Nuts**

Like avocados and olive oil, nuts are rife in heart-healthy, hunger-busting MUFAs. Although predominantly a fat-dense food, nuts also contain a healthy dose of fiber and some protein, and they are also a rich source of essential nutrients (i.e., fat-soluble vitamins, minerals) and phytonutrients.

Because of their diverse nutrient profiles, consider trying a variety of nuts, including:

- Almonds
- Brazil Nuts
- Cashews
- Pecans
- Pistachios
- Walnuts

As you already know, protein, fiber, and unsaturated fats like those found in nuts signal
powerful satiety hormones. Researchers also believe that the sensory characteristics of nuts, specifically the fact that they’re crunchy, also have satiety value. That is, the mechanical aspect of chewing nuts generates a satiety signal. (55)

What’s more, nuts are also resistant to digestion due to the tough walls of their cells. According to researchers from Purdue University, as much as one-fifth of the fat in nuts never gets absorbed by the body. (56) Furthermore, these scientists found that nuts may lead to an unexpected increase in energy expenditure in the hours after consumption.

Even more, consumption of nuts typically results in fewer calories consumed later in the day. In fact, studies estimate that upwards of three-quarters of the calories contributed by nuts is compensated by lower subsequent energy intake. (57)

Overall, a collection of epidemiological evidence suggests that folks who regularly consume nuts have a lower body mass index (BMI) than non-consumers. Further, clinical studies have consistently found that the inclusion of nuts leads to greater compliance and weight loss compared to when nuts are excluded. (58)

**Cold-Pressed Extra Virgin Coconut Oil**

While extra virgin olive oil has always been (and will continue to be) a staple, nutritious, go-to oil for healthy cooking, there’s a new kid on the block that’s getting all the attention as of late, and for good reason. We’re talking about coconut oil, which is actually 90% saturated fat, but it hasn’t always been viewed as healthy.

Perhaps some of the negative light that has previously been shined on coconut oil is somewhat deserved. According to Alexandra Bernardin:
“For years, coconut oil was portrayed as a destroyer of cardiovascular health. Its artery-clogging, heart attack-causing, cholesterol-raising side effects were flaunted in the media, and the public responded by shunning this useful and natural oil. However, researchers made one big mistake, which they conveniently did not publicize: In their studies, they used hydrogenated and partially hydrogenated coconut oil. By doing so, they changed everything good about coconut oil.” (59)

For sake of reference, hydrogenation essentially refers to the fact that these were trans fats that were used, and of course, coconut oil is going to get a bad rap if it’s being chemically warped into this health-derailing nightmare (i.e., trans fats). But, what happens when we use fresh, cold-pressed, extra-virgin coconut oil? We get an all-natural food that is chock-full of health-building saturated fats.

According to Bernardin, here are some of the top reasons you should include coconut oil in your diet:

1. It’s composed of medium chain triglycerides (MCTs), which your body can quickly and efficiently use for energy and are not stored in the body as fat.

2. Like breast milk, coconut oil is high in the fatty acid lauric acid, which plays a critical role in immune system function.

3. It is antiviral, antifungal, antiparasite, and antiprotozoa.

4. Coconut oil is high in capric acid and caprylic acid, which are antioxidants.

5. It is cardioprotective. Populations that consume 30-60 percent of their daily caloric intake from coconuts are virtually free from cardiovascular disease, and it helps to lower cholesterol.

6. Unlike unsaturated vegetable oils like soybean and corn oil, coconut oil does not block the secretion of thyroid hormone.
7. Coconut oil is easily digested and can support healthy digestive function.

8. Coconut oil helps with zinc and magnesium absorption, two very important minerals vital for a multitude of functions in the body including bone health.

In addition, several studies have linked the consumption of extra virgin coconut oil to smaller waist sizes. For example, researchers found that subjects who consumed two tablespoons of coconut oil per day for 12 weeks while following a reduced-calorie diet and including daily exercise (i.e., walking) lost a significant amount of abdominal belly fat compared to the control group that followed the same diet and exercise program without coconut oil. In addition, the coconut oil group also experienced an increase in HDL cholesterol and a decrease in their LDL:HDL cholesterol ratio.

The researchers concluded, “Supplementation with coconut oil does not cause dyslipidemia and seems to promote a reduction in abdominal obesity.”

What’s more, research also suggests that the MCTs found in coconut oil have a significant thermogenic (i.e., metabolism-boosting) effect. In one study, rats were overfed with either long-chain fatty acids (LCTs), which are the common form of fat found in foods, or MCTs. The rats fed the MCTS gained 20% less weight and 23% less body fat.

In another study, researchers found that consuming MCTs increased metabolism more than eating LCTs from other foods. As a matter of fact, the subjects that consumed MCTs lost significantly more weight and burned more fat than the group consuming LCTs. Researchers have also found that consuming just 1 – 2 tablespoons daily of MCTs can increase elevate the metabolism (i.e., thermic effect of feeding) by as much as 5%, which may mean burning an additional 150 calories or more just by swapping your oils.

Many researchers recommend consuming upwards of 2 tablespoons of cold-pressed, extra virgin coconut oil per day. Because of its higher smoke point and its saturated fat
content, it is typically more conducive to cooking than other unsaturated fats, including extra virgin olive oil.

Dark Chocolate

Who doesn’t like dessert? For the most part, nearly all desserts are heavily processed and are rife with refined sugars and inflammatory fats. Simply put, they are not a great option to help you lose fat and optimize your health. But, what if you could literally have your cake and eat it too? Well, with high-quality dark chocolate, you may be able to do precisely that.

Perhaps a more suitable title for this section would be cocoa, as it’s actually cocoa that seems to possess significant health and waistline-friendly benefits. Cocoa contains up to three times more antioxidants than green tea, and it’s these polyphenols that appear to be responsible for the health-conferring benefits of cocoa. (64)

Cocoa, and therefore dark chocolate, is rich in a compound called theobromine, which structurally belongs to a family of compounds collectively referred to as xanthine alkaloids. Also included in this family is caffeine. Theobromine possesses mild stimulant qualities similar to caffeine, and cocoa typically contains about 10 times as much theobromine as caffeine.

That said, theobromine has been shown to have some unique fat loss properties. As is the case with other methylxanthines, theobromine has been shown to suppress the appetite (i.e., anorexia). (65) With dark chocolate, this is an especially nice effect, as a relatively small amount will help control both hunger and your cravings for sweets.

Also similar to caffeine and other methylxanthines, theobromine has been shown to increase lipolysis (i.e., the break down of fat), which means it has the potential
to heighten your fat-burning abilities. What’s more, researchers have found that theobromine can increase fatty acid utilization during exercise, which means more fat burning and, under certain conditions, improved performance. (66)

A very distinct benefit of the polyphenols found in dark chocolate was discovered in a study published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in March of 2005 where researchers found significant insulin sensitivity benefits associated with the naturally-occurring polyphenols found in dark chocolate rich in cocoa. (67) And, as you likely already know, insulin sensitivity is a critical piece of the puzzle when it comes to fat loss, as it holds a key to unlocking your body’s ability to burn fat effectively. (68)

Remember, cocoa is not a chocolate bar, something whose added ingredients and processing reduce the number and type of flavonols, increase calories (cocoa itself has very few), and possibly change the physiological response to the cocoa. As researcher Dr. Andrew Neilson, assistant professor at Virginia Tech states, “The evidence does not show that you can eat a chocolate bar every day and expect to improve your health.”

Keep this in mind when searching for a dark chocolate bar: Generally speaking, the higher the cocoa content the better. As you move down the “healthy” scale of dark chocolate bars (from highest to lowest cocoa content), you’ll typically find more calories and sugar and less protein and fiber (as well as fewer flavonols).

Thus, you should choose a dark chocolate bar with the highest possible cocoa content, and clearly, 100% cocoa will be your best bet. When enjoying dark chocolate, a couple of squares should do the trick, as it still packs a significant amount of calories.
Time to Get Cooking

As you’ve seen above, there’s no crash diet needed to achieve your body transformation goals. Better yet, you can thoroughly enjoy all of these nutrient-dense, great-tasting foods and reap major fat-burning benefits.

If you stick to a diet rich in these foods, you’ll boost your metabolism, increase your ability to burn fat, optimize your fat-burning hormones, and support your fat free mass all while not having to deal with insatiable hunger and cravings.
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