

## **Food And Sex: How You Eat Can Enhance Sex—Or Hurt It**

*By Michael Castleman*

What happens at your table can have surprising effects on what happens in your bedroom. “Sexual function,” says New York City nutritionist Shari Lieberman, Ph.D., “depends on the cardiovascular system, the heart and blood vessels, and the nervous system, the body’s electrical wiring. Food choices can keep these sexually crucial systems functioning at their best, or poison them—and your sex life.”

### **Sex-Damaging Foods**

You don’t have to avoid these foods entirely. But for great sex, eat them sparingly, and work to base your diet on the foods that are good for sex (below) because they’re good for the body as a whole.

### **Fatty Meats: Steak, Prime Rib, Bacon, Sausage, and Lunch Meats**

The myth is that eating red meat is manly. On the contrary: The saturated fat and cholesterol in fatty meats are hell on erections. “Saturated fat and cholesterol narrow the arteries that nourish the heart and increase risk of heart attack,” Lieberman explains. “They also narrow the arteries that carry blood into the penis and contribute to erectile dysfunction (ED).”

Researchers at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine checked the cholesterol levels of 3,250 men, aged 25 and up, and then surveyed their sex lives. The higher their cholesterol, the more likely they were to report ED. Compared with men whose cholesterol was below 180 milligrams per deciliter of blood (mg/dl), those with levels above 240 were almost twice as likely to report ED.

Fatty meats also narrow women’s arteries, which limits blood flow into the clitoris, vulva, and vaginal wall, interfering with vaginal lubrication and sexual responsiveness.

Finally, compared with fruits, vegetables, and things like pasta, fatty meats take longer to digest. They sit in the gut, and make you feel sluggish. After a fatty meal, you might want to have sex, but when you get into bed, you're more likely to fall asleep.

### **Cheese and Whole Milk**

Most cheeses are made with whole milk, which is high in saturated fat and cholesterol—and just as damaging to the arteries as prime rib. The worst mistake is to combine meat, milk, and cheese, for example, a bacon cheeseburger with a shake. A meal like that is loaded with saturated fat. Men and women who eat this type of diet—for example, fast-food burgers several times a week—are at considerable risk for sex problems.

### **Transfats: Cookies, Crackers, Chips, Donuts, Muffins, Croissants, and Other Commercial Baked Goods**

Transfats are created when hydrogen is added to vegetable oil to turn it solid. The prime example is margarine. But any food item whose label lists “hydrogenated” or “partially hydrogenated vegetable oil” contains transfats.

“Transfats are worse for the arteries than saturated fats,” says American Dietetic Association spokesperson Leslie Bonci, M.P.H., R.D., director of sports nutrition at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center “They boost levels of LDL, bad cholesterol, and reduce levels of HDL, good cholesterol.”

Transfats are being removed from many foods, but may still be found in cookies, crackers, chips, muffins, donuts, croissants, and other commercial baked goods. Read food labels. If they say hydrogenated or partially vegetable oil, ask yourself if you really need it. Eating foods containing transfats damages the arteries.

### **Junk Foods, and Highly Processed Foods**

Transfats are not the only reason to avoid junk foods and highly processed foods such as white bread, sugary sweets, and many breakfast cereals. Processing removes most of their nutrients. “You're eating empty calories,” Bonci explains. “You get full, but your body doesn't get much nutritional benefit. For health, for fitness, and definitely for good sex, you want a well nourished body, not one filled up on junk with few nutrients.”

A key nutrient processing removes is zinc. When whole wheat is processed into white flour, about three-quarters of the zinc is removed, Lieberman explains. Subsequent “enriching” adds back many nutrients, but not zinc. Zinc is essential to men’s sexuality and reproduction. “One of the highest concentrations of zinc in the body is found in the prostate gland, which produces most of the fluid in semen,” Lieberman says. “There is some evidence that a diet high in zinc helps prevent midlife prostate enlargement and prostate cancer.” Low zinc levels also suppress libido in both men and women.

Good dietary sources of zinc include whole grains, beans, peas, and seafoods, particularly oysters.

## **Alcohol**

In Macbeth, Shakespeare wrote that the substance used worldwide to coax reluctant lovers into bed “provokes the desire, but takes away the performance.” How true. The first drink is “disinhibiting.” Sweet young things are more likely to accept your sexual invitations. But if you drink more than two beers, cocktails, or glasses of wine in an hour, alcohol becomes a powerful central nervous system depressant that interferes with erection. “Alcohol might help you talk a reluctant lover into bed,” Bonci says, “but once you get there, you may not have much fun. If you drink heavily, all you’ll do between the sheets is pass out.”

Alcohol also hurts sex in another way. “It stimulates appetite at the same time it compromises judgment,” Bonci explains. “So you’re likely to choose foods that aren’t very good for you or your sex life.”

## **Sex-Enhancing Foods**

### **Fruits and Vegetables**

Plant foods are the basis of a healthy diet. “They’re packed with nutrients,” Bonci says, “and they’re low in fat. They help keep the arteries unclogged so they help prevent heart disease, ED, and loss of lubrication and responsiveness in women. They also help prevent cancer. The National Cancer Institute recommends eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day. I couldn’t agree more. Eat your fruits and vegetables. If you don’t like some, eat others. There are so many to choose from. Eat the ones you like, and eat lots of them.”

### **Tomatoes**

For men's sexual and reproductive health, one of the best vegetables is tomatoes. "Tomatoes are rich in lycopene," Lieberman explains. "Studies show that this nutrient, a member of the vitamin A family, helps prevent prostate cancer."

## **Nuts**

Almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, Brazil nuts, pistachios—they're all high in the amino acid, arginine. Arginine is crucial to the synthesis of nitric oxide, a compound in the body involved in erection in men and sexual responsiveness in women. Nuts also have a reputation for being high in fat. "But nut oils are nowhere near as harmful as saturated fat or transfats," Lieberman explains. "In fact, recent studies show that nuts help *reduce* cholesterol."

## **Pumpkin Seeds**

Instead of roasting and munching these seeds just once a year when you carve a Halloween pumpkin, enjoy them year-round. Pumpkin seeds are a rich source of zinc. "Next time you want a satisfying snack," Bonci suggests, "reach for a handful of toasted pumpkin seeds instead of a granola bar. In addition to zinc, pumpkin seeds are packed with nutrients including the antioxidants selenium and vitamin E, which are good for the arteries."

## **Olive Oil**

Saturated fat and transfats narrow the arteries, but olive oil is high in monounsaturated fat, which helps keep them healthy. "Instead of spreading butter or margarine on your bread," Lieberman suggests, "do what they do in Italy: Dip it in olive oil."

## **Wheat Germ**

Toss the Captain Crunch into the garbage. Instead, start your day with a fruit salad topped with applesauce or nonfat yogurt garnished with crunchy, nutty wheat germ. "Wheat germ is a rich source of vitamin E, which helps keep the arteries healthy," Lieberman explains.

## **Start Now**

If you've recently downed a bacon cheeseburger, fries, a pepperoni double-cheese pizza, and a bucketful of junk snacks, you might be worried that your sex life is headed south. Possibly, but the foods that poison sexuality take decades to do their

dirty work. What should you do? “Start eating healthier today,” Bonci explains, “and commit to improving your diet in the future. Every time you eat a salad instead of a grilled cheese sandwich, you’re helping your arteries stay healthy—and that contributes to good sex as well.”