Q  SHOULD I BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE HIGH SATURATED FAT CONTENT IN SOME PLANT FOODS LIKE COCONUT?

A  No, you don’t have to be concerned with high levels of saturated fat in plant foods—as long as you watch your portions. According to the American Heart Association, a diet high in saturated fat from any source can raise LDL (bad) cholesterol levels in our blood, which increases the risk of heart disease. For a healthy heart, the AHA recommends we limit our daily intake of saturated fat to less than 7 percent of total calories. This means if you eat 2,000 calories a day, you should limit your daily intake to under 16 grams of saturated fat.

The standard American diet is high in saturated fat from meat, cheese, dairy-based desserts (such as ice cream), butter, and baked goods made with butter. For plant-based eaters, saturated fat primarily comes from coconut, cocoa butter (chocolate), and palm kernel oil. The jury is still out on whether saturated fat from animals is worse than that found in plants.

One plant-based saturated fat getting lots of attention is coconut oil. There’s evidence that lauric acid—a medium-chain fatty acid found in coconut oil—raises HDL (good) cholesterol levels and may boost the immune system by activating protective white blood cells. Still, the most widely accepted advice for keeping your heart healthy is to use coconut oil and other saturated fats sparingly.

Extra virgin/unrefined coconut oil can be heated to only 280°F, so reserve it for light sautéing or creating salad dressings. Refined coconut oil is a better option for cooking because it can tolerate temperatures up to 365°F.
I've been seeing more and more pea protein in product ingredient lists. What's up with that?

You're right, pea protein is everywhere. Food manufacturers are using it in snack and meal-replacement bars, pastas, batters, and baked goods. You can even buy tubs of pea protein in powder form at health-food/supplement stores.

While pea protein is not a new ingredient (some companies have been producing pea protein isolates since 1997), industry insiders predict it will go mainstream in the very near future for three main reasons: it's GMO-free and sustainably grown, it's gluten-free, and it provides an impressive nutritional profile. Peas are rich in fiber, protein, potassium, and the B vitamin folate. Plus, peas are particularly high in lysine, an essential amino acid your body needs for healthy bones, skin, and mood. Preliminary studies also suggest pea protein may control hunger hormones better than other types of protein. And with dairy and soy both on the list of top allergens, peas can be a safe low-allergen protein swap.

Contrary to what you might think, pea protein does not come from the frozen green peas we typically eat. Instead, it's usually harvested from dried yellow peas. The peas are picked, rinsed, ground into flour, and added to water to isolate the protein, which is then used for powders and in pastes to fortify foods and beverages.

But you don't have to rely on fortified products or powder to provide the benefits of dried yellow peas. Dried peas are nutritious in their natural state: ½ cup (uncooked) provides 12 grams of protein (about a quarter of your daily need) and 12 grams of fiber (about half of your daily need). Dried yellow peas are also versatile in taste and texture, so you can add them to many dishes (including hummus, soup, and salad), or use them to make vegetarian meatballs.

The creamy taste makes you smile!
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