

# Welcome Back Shellfish

Shellfish has suffered from a bad yet undeserved reputation. If you've crossed it off your list of healthy foods, you might not only want to put it back, but move it to the top.

By Heidi Reichenberger McIndoo, MS, RD, LDN

It never fails. Every time I advise a client to eat more shellfish, the response is always the same, a shocked "Isn't it too high in cholesterol?" Americans seem to have gotten a big dose of misinformation when it comes to the nutrition facts about shrimp, lobster, clams, and other shellfish. In fact, these foods are not swimming in cholesterol. Better still, they are low in calories, fat, and saturated fat while also being good sources of healthy fats and assorted vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients.

Many people are under the impression that cholesterol is everything when it comes to increasing one's risk of heart disease and heart attack. That, however, is not the case, and to understand why, you need to know a bit about cholesterol. All animals, including humans, make cholesterol. Some of us make more than others and some aren't as good at getting rid of it. Genetics can play a part in cholesterol metabolism—one reason blood cholesterol levels become high. Another is what we eat. Because all animals make cholesterol, it's found in all the foods we eat that come from animals. It's absent in plant-based foods.

But much more important is the fact that cholesterol in your diet doesn't raise blood cholesterol levels as much as a different substance. "Today, we know that it is actually the saturated fat in foods that has the greatest impact on cholesterol.



Since seafood, including shrimp and lobster, is very low in saturated fat, health experts now give two thumbs up to eating more fish and shellfish,” says Janice Newell Bissex, MS, RD, cofounder of MealMakeoverMoms.com and author of *The Mom’s Guide to Meal Makeovers: Improving the Way Your Family Eats, One Meal at a Time!* A saturated fat is one that is solid at room temperature, such as butter, shortening, beef fat, and chicken skin. Because consumption of saturated fat is far more responsible for raising the levels of cholesterol in your blood than actual cholesterol, it is a much greater risk factor for heart disease than cholesterol intake. Which brings me back to shellfish. Scallops, mussels, and oysters, along with other shellfish, contain very little to no saturated fat. Take a look at this table to see just how low shellfish are in these nutrients compared with other animal-based protein foods.

As you can see, shellfish contain very small amounts of the nutrients many people try to keep in check when watching their weight or trying to eat in a more heart-healthy way. However, what’s important is not what they don’t contain but what shellfish do contain. They are full of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients. One is vitamin B<sub>12</sub>. Diets rich in vitamin B<sub>12</sub> help lower the risk of heart disease, heart attack, stroke, and other cardiovascular problems. It does so by lowering levels of homocysteine—a substance that damages blood vessel walls. Vitamin B<sub>12</sub> changes homocysteine into benign substances. In addition, “shellfish tends to be higher in iron, zinc, and selenium than other fish,” Bissex reports.

Of even greater significance is the omega-3 fatty acids shellfish contain. Omega-3 fatty acids are essential polyunsaturated fats found mostly in fish oils.

| Food (three ounces, cooked)         | Calories | Total Fat (grams) | Saturated Fat (grams) |
|-------------------------------------|----------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Shrimp                              | 84       | 1                 | 0                     |
| Crab                                | 94       | 1                 | 0                     |
| Lobster                             | 83       | 1                 | 0                     |
| Mussels                             | 146      | 4                 | 1                     |
| Oysters                             | 139      | 4                 | 1                     |
| Scallops                            | 62       | 1                 | 0                     |
| Clams                               | 126      | 2                 | 0                     |
| Chicken, white meat without skin    | 140      | 3                 | 1                     |
| Chicken, dark meat with skin        | 210      | 13                | 4                     |
| Pork chop, boneless, trimmed of fat | 184      | 9                 | 3                     |
| Ground beef, eighty percent lean    | 216      | 14                | 5                     |
| Steak, top round, trimmed of fat    | 183      | 8                 | 3                     |
| Steak, Porterhouse                  | 280      | 22                | 9                     |
| Cheddar cheese, one ounce           | 114      | 9                 | 6                     |
| Butter, one ounce                   | 203      | 23                | 15                    |

— Source: USDA, Agricultural Research Service. 2006. USDA Nutrient Database for Standard Reference, Release 19. Nutrient Data Laboratory Home Page: <http://www.ars.usda.gov/nutrientdata>

One of their big claims to fame is that they lower blood cholesterol levels, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (the “bad” cholesterol), and triglyceride levels. In addition, omega-3s slow the development of blood clots that can block blood vessels going to the heart or head and lead to heart attacks and strokes. Omega-3s also slow the growth of plaque that builds up in arteries in the heart and hinders blood flow. And, finally, by helping prevent heartbeat abnormalities, omega-3s can protect against sudden cardiac death.

If those aren’t enough reasons to boost your intake of omega-3-rich shellfish, there’s more. Researchers have found that eating less fat and more fish may lower

your blood pressure. Lower blood pressure, in turn, lowers your risk of having a stroke.

If you’re pregnant, planning to get pregnant, or breast-feeding, there’s good news for you and your baby. A specific omega-3 fatty acid called *docosahexaenoic acid* (DHA) helps brain development. The key time period for this brain growth is three months before until three months after birth. These benefits continue until the age of two but more slowly. This is a great time to add an extra dose of shellfish to your diet. Try to get at least two servings of fish and shellfish per week to reap the benefits.

More good news: there’s been much concern lately about mercury content of fish and cautions regarding pregnant

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women and young children eating fish. High levels of mercury—found in trace amounts in most fish—may harm an unborn or young child's nervous system. Shellfish, however, tends to contain very little. In fact, the fish women and young children are advised not to eat (shark, swordfish, king mackerel, and tilefish) contain around one part per million of mercury while most shellfish contains approximately 0.05 parts per million. Levels in shrimp are actually nondetectable. So you can see how safely you can include shellfish into your diet to obtain those beneficial omega-3s.

People often shun shellfish because they're intimidated by it. They aren't sure how to buy and store it safely or prepare it. Other proteins seem so much easier—you pick up a package of beef or chicken and toss it into the fridge or freezer until you're ready to use it. Shellfish can be a little trickier but certainly not difficult.

Shellfish, as with all seafood, can be stored in the refrigerator as long as you plan to use it within two days. Stacey Viera, spokesperson for the National Fisheries Institute, says, "Make it the last purchase at the grocery store and put it right in the fridge when you get home." Keep it in the coldest part of your refrigerator, which is usually the bottom. Better yet, store it, well-wrapped, in a dish filled with ice, renewing the ice once or twice a day. If you won't be using it within two days, wrap it tightly in freezer paper or freezer bags and store it in the freezer. To enjoy them at best quality, use frozen shellfish within three to six months. To thaw frozen seafood, place it in the refrigerator or in a bowl of cold water, replacing the water every so often.

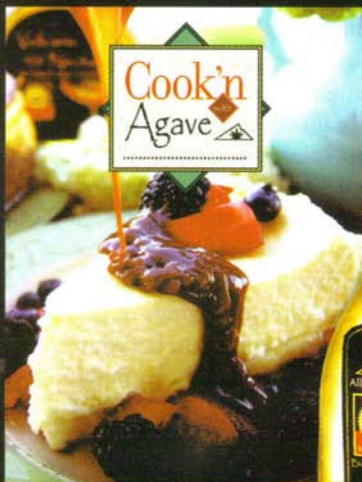
Store oysters, clams, and mussels in open containers in the fridge topped with clean, damp cloths and cook them

within one to two days. To test them for freshness before cooking, tap any that have open shells. If the shell remains open, throw it away. If it closes, it's fine. Also discard any with cracked or broken shells. Live lobsters and crabs should show some leg movement and be cooked the same day you buy them. To make cooking with shrimp extra easy, buy what's called E-Z peel shrimp. It's been cut down the back to make it very simple to slip off the shell.

Shellfish tends to cook quickly so it's an ideal food to use when you're trying to prepare a healthy meal and you're short on time. But watch the cooking method and condiments, warns Victoria Shanta Retelny, RD, LD, a registered dietitian in private practice in Chicago. Avoid deep-frying, the melted butter, and the tartar sauce. "Stick with the tomato-based cocktail sauce and broil or steam shellfish with fresh lemon squeezed over it." ♣

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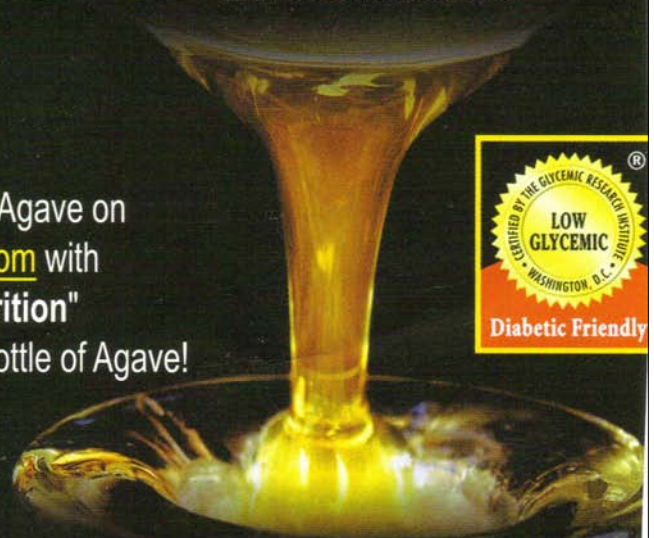
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### Couscous Shrimp Salad

- 1 cup all-natural chicken broth
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 1 cup whole wheat couscous
- 2 tablespoons canola oil, divided
- 1 large red bell pepper, cut into one-inch-thin strips
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 pound medium or large shrimp, shelled and deveined
- ½ cup packed fresh basil leaves cut into very thin strips
- 4 to 5 tablespoons fresh lemon juice (juice of one to two lemons)
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

Place broth and olive oil in medium saucepan and bring to a boil. Remove from the heat, stir in couscous, cover, and let stand five minutes. Set aside.

Heat one tablespoon of the canola oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add the bell pepper and garlic and cook about two minutes, stirring frequently. Push the vegetables to the side, add the remaining oil, and raise the heat to medium-high. Add the shrimp and cook for two minutes per side or until they turn pink and opaque. Remove pan from heat, stir in the basil, lemon juice, salt, and the prepared couscous and toss to combine. Season with pepper to taste.

*(Recipe courtesy of [www.MealMakeoverMoms.com](http://www.MealMakeoverMoms.com))*

### Honey-Broiled Sea Scallops

- 3 tablespoons lime juice
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil

- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 tablespoon low-sodium soy sauce
- ¼ teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 pound sea scallops
- 2 tablespoons sesame seeds

Combine lime juice, oil, honey, soy sauce, and ginger. Add scallops and toss to coat. Cover and refrigerate one hour, stirring occasionally. Remove scallops from marinade, reserving marinade. Thread scallops evenly on four skewers. Place skewers on shallow baking pan that has been sprayed with a nonstick coating. Broil four to six inches from source of heat for two to three minutes. Turn and baste with reserved marinade and continue cooking two to three minutes or until opaque throughout. Place sesame seeds on wax paper and roll each skewer over seeds to evenly coat scallops. Serve immediately.

*(Recipe courtesy of [www.aboutseafood.com](http://www.aboutseafood.com))*

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