

What Happens to Your Cholesterol When You Eat Mac and Cheese Regularly

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While macaroni and cheese itself isn't high in cholesterol, it is high in saturated fat, which stimulates the production of cholesterol that can clog arteries. Here is what you need to know about eating mac and cheese regularly and why moderation is key, whether you are an adult or a child.

1. Mac and Cheese Increases "Bad" LDL Cholesterol

Macaroni and cheese isn't especially high in cholesterol. One cup of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, for instance, contains about 10 milligrams (mg) of cholesterol,¹ well below what most health experts consider "unhealthy."² Some versions have slightly more cholesterol per serving, others less.

However, the **saturated fat** in each serving has an unhealthy effect on cholesterol. When made with whole milk, butter, and full-fat cheese, one serving may account for most or all of your daily recommended intake of saturated fat.

Saturated fats increase the production of **low-density lipoprotein (LDL)**, a type of cholesterol commonly regarded as "bad" cholesterol. When consumed, saturated fat stimulates the liver to produce more LDL. The more you eat, the more LDL is produced.³

2. Saturated Fat Contributes to Plaque Formation

Experts recommend keeping your saturated fat levels as low as possible because excessive intake promotes the formation of **arterial plaque**, clogging arteries.⁴

Saturated fat contributes in several ways:

- **Reduced LDL clearance:** Saturated fat inhibits the activity of LDL receptors in the liver, which are responsible for removing LDL from the bloodstream, causing LDL levels to rise.⁵
- **Arterial damage:** High cholesterol, along with factors like smoking and high blood pressure, can damage the lining of arteries. This allows LDL particles to get trapped in arterial walls.⁶

- **Oxidation and inflammation:** The embedded LDL spurs an inflammatory response by the immune system, making the LDL particles foamier and stickier.⁷
- **Atherosclerosis:** The accumulation of LDL and other fats and substances causes the formation of plaques and a condition known as [atherosclerosis](#). This is where arteries start to harden and narrow, increasing the risk of heart attack and stroke.⁸

3. Eating Mac and Cheese Regularly Can Promote Heart Disease

In and of itself, mac and cheese is not a "cause" of heart disease. However, eating mac and cheese regularly exposes you to higher amounts of saturated fat, which *can* contribute to atherosclerosis and the onset of heart disease.

Studies have shown that atherosclerosis independently increases the risk of a heart attack by anywhere from two- to eight-fold, depending on the extent of arterial obstruction.⁹ The risk is greater in those who consume high quantities of saturated fat.

The current *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommend limiting saturated fat to less than 10% of daily calories.¹⁰ This translates to around 20 grams of saturated fat per day for a 2,000-calorie diet.

With some refrigerated or frozen mac and cheese products, the saturated fat content in a 1-cup (225-gram) serving can be excessive:

- **Stouffer's Mac and Cheese:** 9 grams¹¹
- **Amy's Macaroni & Cheese:** 10 grams¹²
- **Marie Calendar's Creamy Vermont Mac & Cheese:** 13 grams¹³
- **Trader Joe's Creamy Mac & Cheese:** 31 grams¹⁴

Homemade mac and cheese recipes can be even higher. Some recipes from celebrity chefs, such as Ina Garten, are reported to contain as much as 88 grams of saturated fat per serving.¹⁵

4. The Impact on Your Health Can Vary

The impact of mac and cheese on your cholesterol varies depending on the brand and the amount you eat. Generally, boxed mixes contain significantly less saturated fat than fresh or frozen products.

These include box mixes like:

- **Trader Joe's Cheddar Macaroni & Cheese:** 0 grams¹⁶

- **Velvetta Shells & Cheese:** 1.5 grams¹⁷
- **Annie's Classic Cheddar Mac & Cheese:** 2 grams¹⁸
- **Kraft Original Mac & Cheese:** 3.5 grams¹⁹
- **365 by Whole Foods Macaroni and Cheese:** 4 grams²⁰

This doesn't mean you need to avoid the richer, more indulgent versions. Simply be aware of your daily intake of saturated fat by reading nutrition labels. This applies to children and teens, whose recommended intake is limited to 7% of their daily calories.²¹

How to Include Mac and Cheese in a Healthy Diet

Cholesterol is not the only concern for mac and cheese:

- **Calories:** It is typically high in calories, contributing to obesity²²
- **Sodium:** It is [high in sodium](#), which is problematic for people with [high blood pressure](#) or [chronic kidney disease](#).²³
- **Refined flour pasta:** White pasta is also low in fiber and nutrients.²⁴

To include it in a healthy diet:

- Moderation is key; don't eat full-fat versions often.
- Opt for healthier versions or recipes made with whole-grain pasta and low-fat milk and cheese.
- Add less salt when preparing it from a box or recipe.
- Ensure you eat a balanced diet, with fruits, vegetables, whole grains, [and lean protein](#).

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