

[on Conditions](#)

[Staying Healthy](#)

[Resources](#)

[Blog](#)

[COVID-19 U](#)

---

RECENT ARTICLES

---

**NUTRITION**

# In defense of French fries



February 6, 2019

**By Robert H. Shmerling, MD**, Senior Faculty Editor, Harvard Health Publishing; Editorial Advisory Board Member, Harvard Health Publishing

I thought it must be a slow news day. *The New York Times* ran [a story about French fries](#) with a conclusion that shocked no one: French fries aren't a particularly healthy food choice. But is this anything new? And just how bad are they?

## Could French fries actually kill you?

Maybe. At least, that's the implication of the [study](#) that triggered the latest news coverage. Researchers found that regular consumers of French fries don't live as long as those who eat them less often.

Of course, I immediately wondered: is it really the French fries? What else do big-time consumers of French fries do that might affect their longevity? Are they couch potatoes (or should I say couch fries)? Do they drink too much? I'm guessing their other food choices might not be the best. Maybe it's the Big Macs, cheesecake, and smoking that's responsible more than the fries? So, let's take a closer look at the study.

## More French fries, more death

In June 2017, researchers publishing in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* described [a study](#) of 4,400 older adults monitored over an eight-year period that found:

- Higher potato consumption (including fried and non-fried potatoes) was *not* associated with a higher risk of death.
- Eating French fries more than twice a week was associated with a more than doubled risk of death.
- The findings held up even after accounting for obesity, physical activity, smoking, and alcohol consumption (as reported by study subjects during study enrollment).

The authors had some theories on why French fries might raise the risk of death, including:

- French fries have a lot of fat and salt that could raise the risk of cardiovascular disease. During the years of this study, trans fat (a particularly unhealthy type of fat) had not yet

been banned from the US market.

- High consumption of French fries could increase the risk of future high blood pressure, diabetes, or obesity (which are known risk factors for cardiovascular disease and other health problems),
- High consumers of French fries might also be high consumers of other high-fat or high-salt foods, sweetened beverages, and red meat. So, as suspected, this study does not prove that the higher rates of death among higher consumers of French fries were actually due to the fries.

## But are French Fries *really* a "death food"?

This brings us to the real question raised by this new research: must you swear off French fries forever? I say no. Here's why:

- The higher risk of death was noted among those who ate French fries more than twice a week. Eating them once a week or less would likely have a negligible effect on your health.
- Portion size matters. This study didn't provide details of how many fries study subjects ate at one sitting, but an "official" serving is just 10 to 15 individual fries (130–150 calories). Most fast food establishments serve three to four times that amount! Stick with one serving, or share a restaurant serving with a couple of meal mates.
- Homemade "baked fries" using minimal olive or canola oil aren't French fries, but they're close... and much healthier.

The coverage of this new research ("A weapon of dietary destruction!") made it sound as though having fries with your meal is a death sentence. But let's not overstate the "danger" of French fries. And let's also face this irrefutable fact: they're too good to give up.

But, if we think of them as an occasional indulgence and understand what a single portion of French fries looks like, there's no reason to eliminate them from your diet. And they go great with a salad.

*Follow me on Twitter @RobShmerling*

## About the Author



**Robert H. Shmerling, MD**, Senior Faculty Editor, Harvard Health Publishing; Editorial Advisory Board Member, Harvard Health Publishing

Dr. Robert H. Shmerling is the former clinical chief of the division of rheumatology at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC), and is a current member of the corresponding faculty in medicine at Harvard Medical School. ... [See Full Bio](#)

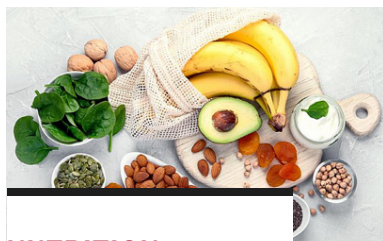
[View all posts by Robert H. Shmerling, MD](#)

### Disclaimer:

As a service to our readers, Harvard Health Publishing provides access to our library of archived content. Please note the date of last review or update on all articles.

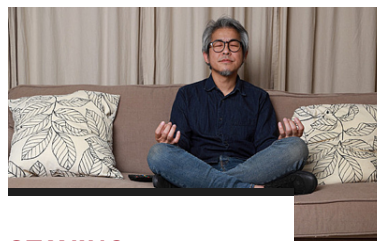
**No content on this site, regardless of date, should ever be used as a substitute for direct medical advice from your doctor or other qualified clinician.**

## Related Topics



### NUTRITION

**What can magnesium do for you and how much do you need?**



### STAYING HEALTHY

**6 simple tips to reduce your blood pressure**



### NUTRITION

**Less butter, more plant oils, longer life?**