



How to be a **HEALTHY COOK**

AS MORE RESEARCH WARNS OF THE DANGERS OF OVERCOOKING, **ANNA-MARIE CASAS** ASKS THE EXPERTS HOW WE CAN MAKE MEALTIMES MORE HEALTHY WITH THE RIGHT KITCHEN KNOW-HOW

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has recently launched a campaign to help people understand how to minimise their exposure to acrylamide, a possible carcinogenic chemical, when cooking they are at home.

It follows scientific consensus that overcooking could cause cancer and that we should aim for a golden yellow colour or lighter when frying, baking, grilling, toasting or roasting starchy foods like potatoes, root vegetables and bread.

That there's no smoke without fire when it comes to overcooking may come as little surprise, but the 'killer in our kitchen' headlines may have caused many to rethink their cooking habits.

"The risks of overcooking food are two-fold," explains registered dietitian Faith Toogood. "Many nutrients (some vitamins and antioxidants in particular) are damaged by heat and therefore cooking can destroy some of the goodness in certain foods such as fruit and vegetables. More concerning is the issue that certain foods when cooked are believed to become carcinogenic."

So, how can we cook up delicious meals without compromising health?

SHOP SMARTER

While virtually impossible to avoid completely, it's worth knowing which products contain acrylamide.

Acrylamide is a chemical compound produced when starchy foods are heated to excessive temperatures for prolonged periods and is found in a wide range of foods, including crisps, chips, cakes and bread.

Faith explains: "There are no clear guidelines on the 'safe' level of acrylamide that an individual can eat, so aim for reduction where possible rather than elimination, which would be extremely hard."



How we store our food pre-cooking can also increase acrylamide levels. The FSA advises against putting raw potatoes for frying or roasting in the fridge and to keep them in a dark, cool place at a temperature above 6°C.

SPEED IT UP, SAFELY

When time is of the essence, microwaving is one of your options. Microwaving uses a small amount of water and essentially steams food from the inside out, with a reduced period of exposure to heat.

Alexis says: "If you are strapped for time, it can be a convenient method to cook foods without compromising nutritional content too much."

PLAY TO VEGGIES' STRENGTHS AND STEAM AHEAD

Raw vegetables are often the healthier option, but cooking gently can bring out the best in others.

"While some veggies are good for you in their raw form (cabbage, cauliflower and watercress), others are much better when they're cooked," says



Lee. "Asparagus, mushrooms and broccoli, for example, are better for you when they're cooked. However, in my opinion, getting veg into your diet is the most important thing, so if you'll be more likely to eat cabbage when it's cooked, go for it!"

The kitchens of few healthy cooks are without a steamer. While crispy kale chips and crunchy cauliflower are very tempting, says Lee, "steaming food is easily one of the healthiest ways to cook. It's also delicious."

"Broccoli can lose up to 50 per cent of its vitamin C content when boiled," adds Alexis. "Keeping cooking times to a minimum will also ensure nutrient loss is reduced."

EASY DOES IT WITH A SLOW COOKER

With our busy, fast lifestyles, it's ironic that a slow cooker is the perfect kitchen solution.

"Slow cooking cooks your food gradually throughout the day at a lower temperature. Despite having a prolonged cooking time, foods aren't exposed to as high temperatures," says Alexis. Moreover, slow cookers are perfect for stews and casseroles which ensure that any leached nutrients

remain in the pot - and you can set your slow cooker so the food is ready when you get in from work!

Lee adds: "Slow cookers are a great lifetime investment and there's something so warming about home-made stews and soups. They make cooking easy as it does most of the work for you - great for those with busy lifestyles who are conscious about nourishing their bodies."



GRILLING, BAKING AND BARBECUING

"If you are trying to reduce your fat intake, then you could choose to grill or bake your foods and use herbs, spices, onions or garlic to flavour," says Alexis. However, nutrients can be lost, so you may wish to add them back into the dish as a gravy or sauce.

Marinades are also great for adding taste and reducing the risk of charring food, particularly when you wheel out the barbecue in the summer.

Lee says: "I love using different cooking methods as they each create a different flavour and feel. Barbecues and ovens are great as they make food taste delicious, but we need to be careful with cooking times. This is why I love my slow cooker - it does all the work for me!"

GET YOUR TIMINGS RIGHT

You should think twice about ignoring food producers' guidelines.

"Cooking times on food packets are there for a reason," says nutritionist Alexis Poole. "They ensure the food is cooked to a level safe for consumption, but not cooked for too long or at temperatures which are too high."

"Be conscious of cooking times when it comes to combining ingredients," adds nutritionist, chef and author, Lee Holmes. "Quick veg like asparagus, leeks and courgettes only take 10-15 minutes whereas cauliflower, carrots and aubergine take longer."

LUBE YOUR OIL KNOWLEDGE

If you have to fry, choose oils wisely.

"Different oils are good for different things," explains Faith. "Some are better used in dressings whilst some are better for frying and sautéing. When we heat oils, they reach a temperature at which they start to break down and 'smoke'."

The higher the smoke point of an oil, the when you cook, the better. Unrefined oils tend to have a lower smoke point than refined oils, which are better for deep and pan



frying. Both are fine for stir frying at lower heats. "Extra virgin

coconut oil is a great oil for frying because it has a high smoke point," says Lee. "I also love avocado oil for its anti-oxidant levels and ability to help the body absorb nutrients from the food you've cooked."

Also, beware of fats. Small amounts of trans-fats, which may raise cholesterol, can form when vegetable oils are heated to very high temperatures. NHS advice is to swap saturated fat with unsaturated for a healthy heart, but there's more to consider - certain oils can produce high levels of aldehyde, a chemical linked to cancer, heart disease and dementia.

"Generally, oils with less unsaturated fatty acids and a higher saturated fat profile produce less aldehyde," says Alexis, stressing that consumption should be in moderation.

Our Experts



Lee Holmes is a qualified nutritionist and author of *Fast Your Way to Wellness* (Murdoch Books, £14.99). Find her on superchargedfood.com



Alexis Poole is company nutritionist for the food preferences management tool, Spoon Guru. Learn more about what they can do for you at spoon.guru



Faith Toogood is a registered dietician and Nutrition Ambassador for health and wellbeing website, Make Your Switch. Learn more on makeyourswitch.co.uk