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IS MICROWAVING FOOD BAD FOR YOU? WHAT 23 STUDIES HAVE TO SAY.



Some say that microwaves make your food “radioactive” and release toxic radiation, which raises your risk of cancer. Others say that microwaves destroy the nutrients in food, which could increase your risk of nutrient deficiencies. And still others say there isn’t enough research on microwaves, so we should all play it safe and avoid them.

On the other hand, people say that the claims against microwaves are unfounded. They’re just one more example of better living through science that people need to stop handwringing about.

So, who’s right?

Well, despite the constant Internet fearmongering, there’s no evidence that microwaves are dangerous. They have been studied repeatedly, and not only are they safe, they may actually be a healthier way to cook some foods.

There are legitimate concerns about microwaving plastic containers, but it’s still debatable how dangerous that is, too.

WHY DO PEOPLE THINK MICROWAVING FOOD IS DANGEROUS?

There are four reasons people say that microwaving food is dangerous:

Microwave Myth #1 - Microwaves Release Harmful Radiation and Make Your Food Radioactive

When you think of the word “radiation,” you probably think of the effects of a nuclear bomb or a power plant disaster like Chernobyl: burning, cancer, and a slow, painful death.

It makes sense you’d be worried about using the same technology to warm your food.

Therein lies the problem—it’s not the same technology. “Radiation” is a broad term that includes any kind of energy that falls on the electromagnetic spectrum.

Just about everything around you emits some level of radiation, including the lights above your head, the ground underneath your feet, and, of course, the screen you’re staring at right now.

The different types of radiation are categorized based on the size and frequency of their wavelengths. Large, low-frequency wavelengths tend to be the safest, like the

kind emitted from radios (radio waves). On the other end of the spectrum, you have small, high-frequency wavelengths, which are dangerous.

You can divide these different types of wavelengths into two categories: non-ionizing radiation and ionizing radiation.

Ionizing radiation is strong enough that it can destroy atoms, including the ones that make up your body. Non-ionizing radiation is only strong enough to “excite” atoms—making them wiggle at a higher frequency.

Microwave ovens use, obviously, a kind of radiation called “microwaves,” which are also emitted from cellphone towers and T.V. satellites. Microwave ovens work by “trapping” the microwaves inside a smaller area, so your food absorbs them before they can dissipate.

Microwaves have another property that makes them perfectly suited for heating food—they only heat certain kinds of molecules, the main one in food being water. This is why certain kinds of glass don’t warm up in the microwave—most of the molecules aren’t affected by microwaves.

Now, for something to be “radioactive” it needs to emit ionizing radiation, which microwaves don’t. Microwaving food also doesn’t impart any radiation into food, so it’s impossible for a microwave to make your food “radioactive.”

The wavelengths emitted from a microwave are powerful enough to boil water, but not enough to irradiate your food or damage DNA.

Now, what if some of that radiation were to leak out? Couldn’t that still hurt you? No, not if the microwave is functioning properly.

This has to do with the size of the wavelengths created by microwave ovens. The wavelengths generated by microwave ovens are about 5 inches wide, which is far too big to pass through the metal shield that’s built into all microwaves.

There’s little reason to believe microwaves are harmful based on what we know about physics.

The Bottom Line

The kind of radiation microwave ovens use to heat your food isn’t dangerous, and it’s impossible to make your food “radioactive” by microwaving it.

Microwave Myth #2 - Microwaving Lowers the Nutrient Content of Your Food

You may have heard that microwaves destroy many of the vitamins and minerals in food, making them far less nutritious. Typically, you're told that the radiation from microwaves is uniquely destructive, and that it removes far more nutrients than other kinds of cooking.

Microwaves can slightly reduce the nutrient content of some foods, but not enough to make a significant difference in your health, vitality, or longevity. As far as cooking methods go, microwaving is actually one of the best methods for preserving the nutrients in food.

All forms of cooking reduce the nutrient content of food. When you heat food, some of the water evaporates, taking a portion of the nutrients with it.

If you want to retain the nutrients in your food, then you want to cook them quickly and with as little water as needed, which is exactly what microwaving does.

The Bottom Line

Microwaving food doesn't destroy more nutrients than other common cooking methods. In some cases, it makes the nutrients in food more easily digested.

Microwave Myth #3 - Microwaving Plastic Containers Releases Toxic Chemicals

According to many, plastic containers of all kinds are toxic. They release harmful chemicals into your food that cause all manner of health problems.

There's a kernel of truth here, but most of the fear is unfounded.

All plastic containers are made from a smorgasbord of chemicals, and some of these chemicals can transfer into your food.

The two main chemicals we're talking about are:

- ✓ Bisphenol A (BPA)
- ✓ Phthalates

At high doses, it's possible that both of these compounds can mimic the effects of estrogen in the body, which is why they've been blamed for weight gain, infertility, cancer, and other problems. The jury is still out on how harmful these compounds really are, but you generally want to limit your exposure if you can.

So, does microwaving food actually increase your exposure to these chemicals?

Probably not.

A review from the Institute of Health and Consumer Protection found that the amount of chemicals released from plastic bottles isn't nearly enough to have any impact on your health. This was true even after the bottles were boiled, brushed, and run through the dishwasher.

If you repeatedly heat plastic containers over and over, they do release more chemicals, but the amounts are still well within the current safety guidelines.

The Bottom Line

Microwaving plastic containers increases the amount of chemicals that are released, but the amounts are too small to have any impact on your health.

Microwave Myth #4 - Microwaving "Kills" Food

Some people say that food is "alive," that cooking kills its beneficial properties, and so you should eat all of your food raw. This, of course, means you aren't allowed to use a microwave.

There are two reasons this idea is dead on arrival (har har).

First of all, more or less everything you eat is dead, regardless of how you store or cook it. Biologically speaking, plants start dying the second they're harvested, the cells in meat and animal products die soon after the animal does, and frozen foods are dead long before they reach your dinner table.

Second, whether or not a food is "dead" or "alive" has almost no bearing on its healthfulness. Some nutrients, especially antioxidants, do start to degrade soon after fruits and vegetables are harvested, but that's true regardless of whether or not the food is cooked later.

The Bottom Line

Everything you eat is already dead regardless of how you cook it, and that's true of microwaving food, too.

THE BOTTOM LINE ON WHETHER OR NOT MICROWAVING FOOD IS BAD FOR YOU

Microwaves use radiation to cook food, and anything associated with the word "radiation" tends to get a bad rap.

The truth, though, is that we're exposed to thousands of sources of radiation every day, and at bottom, microwaves tend to be one of the safer kinds.

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