

Is Ghee Better Than Butter?

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Ghee has been used in traditional cooking for eons, as an oil and as an ingredient, but it's also an Ayurvedic go-to for massages and herbal ointments, and as a medicinal to remedy rashes and burns
- › Making ghee starts with butter made from cow's milk and involves separating liquid fats from the milk solids and removing the milk solids, a method many believe is healthier than butter
- › Ghee, which is heated longer than most other types of clarified butter, is darker and has a richer, nuttier flavor, as well as a higher smoke point, making it easier and healthier for sautéing – and you can make your own
- › Due to compounds such as conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) and a fatty acid known as butyrate acid in ghee, your inflammation and coronary heart disease risk may be reduced and your digestion improved
- › In ghee, the milk is separated from the fat, so the lactose as well as casein is reduced, making it better than butter if you have allergies or sensitivities to dairy products

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For anyone unfamiliar with the term ghee, another name for it is clarified butter. One difference between ghee and regular butter is that the former doesn't have as many dairy proteins, and there are a host of health advocates who maintain that ghee is the healthier option.

Starting with pure butter made from cow's milk, the ghee-making process involves heating and separating liquid fats from the milk solids, which become caramelized, and removing the milk solids (which also removes most of the lactose).

Ghee has been used in traditional cooking in India, Pakistan and Southeast Asia for eons, as an oil and as an ingredient, but it's also an Ayurvedic go-to for herbal ointments, massage and as a medicinal to remedy rashes and burns. While butter isn't bad for you (especially in comparison with vegetable oil, margarine and the multitude of erroneous, mass-marketed options introduced in the 1960s), ghee, which started as butter, may be the better choice.

For one thing, ghee, heated longer than most clarified butter, is darker and has a nuttier flavor, as well as a higher smoke point, making it easier and healthier for sautéing. In fact, including ghee in your diet may bring benefits for several areas, including your heart. Ghee is made up of about 50% saturated fat, which was considered a bad thing until the medical community and nutritionists began realizing that fat – including saturated fat – is good for you.

Interestingly, breast milk contains 54% saturated fat. Good fat like this is vital to proper development and your body can't function without it. Even the American Heart Association recommends that people get 5 or 6% of their daily food intake from saturated fat, which is still far too low (you actually need upward of 50 to 70% healthy fat in your diet for optimal health), but butter deliciously helps to fulfill that requirement.¹

So the "clarified" part is at least part of what makes ghee better than butter, but still, there are caveats. It's also helpful to understand that "milk," produced as it typically is in the U.S. today, contains elements that weren't (or shouldn't be) meant for human consumption. To explore all the facets of what ghee is, you must first start with milk.

You Must Start With Milk, but Not Just Any Old Milk

You probably already know that most of the milk produced on American farms is highly processed to homogenize and pasteurize it, superficially to remove potential pathogens.

However, zapping it with high temperatures, called ultra-high temperature processing (UHT), is also to give the milk a longer shelf life, and the process destroys many of the natural immune-boosting enzymes and vitamins such as B6, B12 and C.

Beneficial digestive bacteria are eradicated as well, which often leads to constipation along with a host of other problems. In one of the most ironic twists, pathogenic bacteria might be killed off, but they're not removed from the final product, so those fragments remain, further explaining the alarming abundance of milk allergies. The Organic Consumers Association (OCA) notes:

"When you drink milk that has gone through these processes, you're basically getting a 'dead' beverage ... pasteurization and homogenization destroy nutrients and proteins, make healthy fats rancid and cause free radicals to form in the body. They denature milk by altering its chemical structure ...

*Enzymes like lactase, galactase and phosphate, essential for the assimilation of nutrients ... are destroyed. Without these, milk becomes very difficult to digest. In fact, the lack of lactase in pasteurized milk is the cause of lactose intolerance. Unfortunately, the pancreas cannot produce these enzymes, so it becomes overstressed – a risk factor for diabetes and other diseases."*²

Sustainable Table notes that modern processes are so far removed from traditional farming methods they can't even be called farming anymore. It began with the industrialized "animal feeding operations, where animals are kept and raised in confined situations."³ When they get large enough – 700 cows in a dairy operation – the word "concentrated" is added, as in CAFOs.⁴ In a nutshell:

"During the early 20th century, the increase in livestock in industrial dairy farms led to unsanitary and poor hygiene practices. This resulted in the rampant spread of disease-causing bacteria to become rampant, which contaminated the milk and infected people. That was the main reason why pasteurization became widespread.

*Today, most commercial milk that comes from confined [concentrated] animal feeding operations (CAFOs) still needs to be pasteurized because the conditions in these overcrowded farms have worsened exponentially, leading CAFOs to becoming hotbeds for pathogenic bacteria contamination."*⁵

'Sensitivities' Can Involve Casein, Lactose and Gluten

Ghee, because it's had quantities of the dairy proteins removed, has in the process had much of the casein and lactose eliminated. Lactose, according to the Cambridge Dictionary,⁶ is a type of sugar found in milk, and casein is the main protein in **raw milk**. Casein and gluten have a similar molecular structure. Healthy Eating notes:

*"Gluten and casein are both proteins, but gluten is found in wheat, barley and rye, while casein is in milk and dairy products. Some people are allergic to one or both; others have an inherited condition called celiac disease."*⁷

Cow's milk is noted as one of the first foods given to babies and subsequently is one of the first types of allergies to appear in children. Respiratory problems are one of the first symptoms. Initially conducted in Austria in 2014, one study⁸ notes several symptoms that casein sensitivity can bring about, including:

- Rashes or redness
- Itching
- Abdominal pain and bloating
- Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea
- Coughing, wheezing and asthma symptoms

Unfortunately, those are the milder cow's milk allergy (CMA) symptoms. As far back as Hippocrates, gastrointestinal and skin problems were reported, but in the early 20th century, symptomology from milk consumption became more frequent. Besides diarrhea, there were incidences of slowed physical growth in children, as well as anaphylactic shock.

A page in an article covered by JAMA Network in 1994⁹ noted that cow's milk allergens in infants range from 0.5 to 7.5% but may be as high as 25% in some patient groups, and it's often missed due to unspecified symptoms and different areas of the world. Another study noted that cow's milk more frequently being given to infants in lieu of breast milk may explain part of the increase being seen.

Ghee Made From Organic, Grass Fed Butter Is Better

Why start with organic, grass fed butter for making ghee? Consider that the overuse of antibiotics leads to antibiotic resistance, which results in even stronger pathogenic bacteria and new strains of diseases. According to a report from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA's) Department of Health and Human Services,¹⁰ 80% of the antibiotics used in the U.S. are routinely fed to livestock animals to "fight disease."

In addition, the ghee you eat is only as good as the milk used to make the original butter. Your very best bet is organic, grass fed butter, which is made from the milk of cows that ate grass rather than grains, such as genetically engineered (GE) corn.

And if possible, use the raw form of the milk, especially if you're making your own ghee. Some of the best nutrients in ghee, and in butter as well, are vitamins A, E, K, folate and choline, according to USDA's National Nutrient Database.¹¹ Nutritionally, differences between butter and ghee include:

- Butter can smoke and burn at 350 degrees Fahrenheit (F), while ghee can handle heat up to 485 degrees F.
- Compared to other oils, ghee contains less acrylamide, a chemical compound that becomes toxic under heat and has even been linked to cancer in animal studies.¹²
- According to Medical News Today,¹³ ghee is rich in **conjugated linoleic acid (CLA)**, which has been linked to a lower coronary heart disease risk.¹⁴
- Ghee contains a fatty acid known as butyrate acid, found to aid in digestive health and, like butter, possibly fighting inflammation¹⁵ as well as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and leaky gut.¹⁶

- Butyric acid may also help prevent colon cancer and insulin sensitivity, and as a result may help protect against Type 2 diabetes.¹⁷

The Better Question May Be 'When Is Ghee Better?'

Butter is good, not just because it's not margarine, but as a healthy food, again, provided it's organic and grass fed. For some people, though, ghee is better. It depends on your needs. The bottom line is, if you're lactose sensitive or intolerant, ghee is a double blessing, and the higher smoke point translates to healthier forms of the food you cook with it.

Ghee is widely available at supermarkets and organic specialty stores, or you can make your own from pure organic, grass fed butter. Kettle and Fire explains its simple seven-step process:¹⁸

Cut organic, grass fed butter into one-half inch pieces.

Melt the butter over medium heat.

Simmer it until the butter starts to foam and bubble.

Cook another 10 to 15 minutes until it begins to foam a second time.

Turn off the heat once the milk solids have turned red-brown and settled in the bottom of your pan.

Allow it to cool for a few minutes.

Then strain the mixture through a cheesecloth into a container with a tight-fitting lid. That's it.

As for cooking, you can use ghee in any food just as you would butter: on your eggs, meats, veggies — you name it. The smoke point argument comparing ghee with butter is

a valid one, but ghee in this regard is also better than coconut oil, MCT oil and olive oil, according to Bulletproof, which adds:

"Ghee has a nutty flavor and tastes more buttery than butter itself. It holds up to strong spices well, which is one reason it's a staple of Indian and Thai cooking. Ghee also pulls fat-soluble flavors and nutrients out of spices when you cook the two together.

*It's ideal for curries, sauces, and other slow-cooked or simmered dishes. It's also great drizzled over veggies with a bit of sea salt. Oh, and you don't have to refrigerate it. It's shelf-stable and won't go bad for years."*¹⁹

Sources and References

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