

Keto-friendly Vegetables

By: Mark Sisson



When the keto diet first skyrocketed in popularity in the late 2010s, it quickly gained a reputation as the “bacon and butter” diet. Vegetables might appear on one’s plate as a small side of spinach or, more likely, cauliflower masquerading as everything from rice to pizza crust to wings. By and large, the focus was on *limiting* consumption to “keto vegetables” while focusing mainly on increasing fat intake. (I’m talking mainstream keto, mind you, not the Primal Keto Reset approach.)

This, as you’d expect, led to no end of pearl-clutching from mainstream medical professionals and the popular media, who quickly branded keto as a dangerous fad diet, a heart attack in the making. It was true that many early adopters of keto went hard on butter, cream, cheese, bacon, and other high-fat foods, probably as an understandable backlash against the low-fat diet dogma that dominated the previous four decades. Some people still do, I’m sure.

However, I think most keto folks now understand that they cannot (or should not, anyway) live on butter alone. **At least in more forward-thinking health circles, contemporary keto looks less bacon-and-butter and more like a lower-carb version of the Primal Blueprint way of eating, complete with bountiful salads and larger servings of protein.**

Personally, I’m all for keto eaters embracing a wide array of produce (keto-carnivore diets notwithstanding). At some point, though, the carb question comes into play. By definition, keto requires you to limit your carbohydrate intake to keep glucose and insulin low enough to facilitate ketogenesis. All vegetables contain carbohydrates, some more than others. You can’t eat

unlimited amounts of vegetables, especially the higher-carb ones, if you want to stay in ketosis all the time.

So how do you decide which ones are best?

What Vegetables Are Best for Keto?

In order to achieve ketosis, most people need to limit carbohydrate intake to a maximum of 30 to 50 grams per day. **Hence, the best vegetables to include on a keto diet are the ones that deliver the most nutrients with the fewest carbs.** That sounds straightforward, but in practice, it can be hard to know where to draw the line.

The internet is rife with lists that sort foods into discrete “allowed on keto” and “not allowed on keto” categories. They mean well—and they do help simplify the often confusing transition from SAD eating to keto—but they lack nuance. **No food will knock you out of ketosis in a single bite. There are no “bad” vegetables. There are only serving sizes and carbohydrate content and fiber.**

Why does fiber matter? Because fiber is not absorbed into the bloodstream and converted into glucose. It’s counted as a carbohydrate, but it does not contribute to the glucose-induced insulin spike you want to minimize on keto. Fiber, especially the soluble type, is mostly just food for your gut microbes. From a ketosis perspective, fiber is neutral.

And in vegetables, especially the leafy and above-ground non-starchy varieties, much of their carb content is actually fiber, meaning their glucose/insulin impact is minimal. So much so that I don’t even count these varieties against the 50 grams of (total) carbohydrates I recommend as the limit in the Keto Reset. They’re not the only vegetables *allowed* on keto, just the easiest to enjoy in abundance.

My Favorite Vegetables for Keto

Without further ado, these are my top vegetables to enjoy on keto. If your favorite doesn’t appear here, never fear. You can still include it, I’m sure. **This list is half based on personal preference, half on carbohydrate and nutrient content.** Many vegetables that don’t appear on this list would still be considered “keto-friendly” even by the strict keto police; they’re simply not ones I gravitate towards first.

1. Bitter greens

Kale, arugula, mustard greens, endive, dandelion greens, turnip greens, collard greens, broccoli rabe, watercress. Increasingly, science is finding that bitter foods have unique metabolic and gut health benefits.

2. Other leafy greens

Spinach, lettuce (all types), for my Big-Ass Salads

3. Cauliflower

So versatile it has become a joke in the low-carb world, but that's just because it's great in so many dishes. Who am I to argue?

4. Broccoli and broccolini

Is there anything better than crispy roasted broccoli next to a big, juicy steak? And the sprouts contain sulforaphane, a compound with impressive features that might make broccoli sprouts the next big superfood.

5. Bok choy

One of the sulfur-rich vegetables that may help the body buffer oxidative stress. And it's delicious sauteed or added to stir-fries.

6. Green beans

A classic.

7. Mushrooms (all varieties)

Besides their pleasing textures and umami flavors, mushrooms pack prebiotics to nourish your gut bugs.

8. Asparagus

High in vitamin K, excellent grilled, roasted, or air-fried, and you can wrap it in bacon. (Hey, I didn't say you *shouldn't* eat bacon on keto.)

9. Cabbage

Especially when fermented into sauerkraut or kimchi. Everyone should eat fermented vegetables.

10. Fiddlehead ferns

My dark-horse pick. I just think they deserve more publicity.

What about avocados?

Obviously, avocados get a big yes from me, but they're also a fruit. I'm not putting them on my list of favorite keto vegetables, lest the entire internet come for my head.

Why Eat ANY Vegetables on Keto?

You don't HAVE to. But as I've said about the carnivore diet before, I think most people probably do better in the long run eating at least *some* vegetables. Rather than completely excluding plant foods, I'd recommend something like "carniflex," a meat-centric diet with strategic plant additions.

Regardless, most Primal folks are omnivores, so they want and need strategies for incorporating vegetables into their keto macros. In that case, here's what you should keep in mind:

1. **Any vegetable can work on a keto diet.** Some just happen to be relatively higher in carbohydrates than others (beetroot, parsnips, celeriac, for example).
2. **Prioritizing above-ground leafy and non-starchy vegetables lets you pack your plate with colorful fare without meticulously counting carbs.** Since these foods contain a good deal of fiber (low net carbs), their glucose and insulin impact (and hence their likelihood of interfering with ketosis) is minimal. They also deliver a wide array of nutrients and keep your meals varied and interesting.
3. **Adjust serving sizes as needed.** For higher-carb vegetables—think ones that grow below ground or that taste sweeter—look up the carb content of a typical serving in a tool like Cronometer. Make sure you aren't blowing a huge chunk of your daily allotment on a small serving of a single food.

Ok, those are my top 10. What would you have included?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark Sisson is the founder of Mark's Daily Apple, godfather to the Primal food and lifestyle movement, and the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Keto Reset Diet*. His latest book is *Keto for Life*, where he discusses how he combines the keto diet with a Primal lifestyle for optimal health and longevity. Mark is the author of numerous other books as well, including *The Primal Blueprint*, which was credited with turbocharging the growth of the primal/paleo movement back in 2009. After spending three decades researching and educating folks on why food is the key component to achieving and maintaining optimal wellness, Mark launched Primal Kitchen, a real-food company that creates Primal/paleo, keto, and Whole30-friendly kitchen staples.