

Cookie Basics

When I think of baking homemade cookies ~ YUM! The smell alone is enough to make my mouth water. But the right texture doesn't just happen. Each ingredient has a specific purpose. Let's look at the basic ingredients and the science behind how to make the perfect cookie.



Butter or Margarine

Shortening, butter, and margarine are all fats. But not all fats are created equal when it comes to baking cookies. Fats are used in cookies to:

- ✿ tenderize and soften the texture
- ✿ add moistness and richness
- ✿ increase the keeping quality
- ✿ add flavor
- ✿ assist in leavening when used as a creaming agent

Butter or margarine is usually used in cookies because it adds a desirable flavor and melts in your mouth. Margarines with added water or "light" margarines are not suitable for cookies. Unless a recipe calls for shortening, they, too, are unsuitable because they are manufactured to have certain texture and hardness. Butter is a natural product that is hard and brittle when cold but very soft at room temperature and melts easily.

Eggs

The most important function of eggs is to act as an emulsifier. By surrounding small particles of fat, the egg helps make the cookie dough smoother. In addition, eggs incorporate tiny air bubbles when beaten and add moisture, color, flavor, and nutritional value. More eggs in a recipe produce a chewier cookie.



All-Purpose Flour

The protein or gluten found in flour helps form the structure of dough. Because you don't want much elasticity of the dough in cookies, they require a softer flour or one with less protein, such as all-purpose flour. Self-rising flour may also be used in recipes, but because it has added baking powder and salt, these ingredients must be eliminated from the original recipe.

Baking Powder and Soda

Baking powders are mixtures of baking soda plus an acid. If moisture and an acid are present, baking soda releases carbon dioxide, which causes cookies to rise slightly.

Salt

The amount of salt is constant in cookie recipes, about 1 teaspoon for every pound of flour.

Spices, Flavorings, and Extracts

These are used to add flavor.

Sugar

Sugar has a tenderizing effect on gluten and egg proteins in the cookie dough. A finely granulated sugar blends completely with the other ingredients. If the sugar remains undissolved, the cookie will be open-textured.

Baking Tips

For proper heat circulation, cookies should be baked on shiny, flat pans without sides. Grease the cookie sheets for meringue and drop cookies but do not grease the pans for rolled and refrigerator cookies. Baking stones offer crisp cookies if the stone has been preheated. Bar cookies require a pan with sides. Either metal or glass will do.



Cookies are baked at slightly higher temperatures than cakes. Cookies with very high sugar content or with condensed milk as an ingredient may need a lower temperature for baking. Low temperatures increase spreading and slow browning, while high temperatures have the opposite effect. Preheat the oven before adding cookie sheets.

For best browning results, place the cookie sheet in the center of the oven and bake one sheet of cookies at a time. If you want to bake two sheets of cookies at a time, arrange the oven racks into thirds to prevent cookies on the bottom rack from being too near the heat source and over baking. To ensure cookies brown evenly, switch the position of the cookie sheets when baking is half finished.

To be more efficient in your cookie baking, use at least two to three cookie sheets. While one sheet of cookies bakes, you can get another ready for the oven. Place cookie dough on cool pans only. Set the timer for the minimum baking time indicated in the recipe, then check cookies so they do not over bake. All cookies should be baked only until done, as overly brown or dried out cookies are unsatisfactory and store poorly.

Remove cookies from the baking sheet immediately to prevent sticking and over cooking. Cool cookies on a rack for at least 10 minutes before handling, because cookies firm up as they cool.

Evaluation

Besides their flavor and appearance, cookies are judged according to crispness, softness, chewiness, and spread.

↪ *Crispness* occurs as a result of a low ratio of liquid to flour (i.e., a small amount of liquid, high fat and sugar content, or sufficient baking) and thin or small shape.

↪ *Softness* is related to a high ratio of liquid to flour (i.e., a large amount of liquid, a low fat and sugar content, or insufficient baking), use of sugars such as honey, molasses, and corn syrup, and thick or large shape.

↪ *Chewiness* is caused by a high moisture content, large amount of eggs, and/or the development of gluten during mixing.

↪ *Spread* is increased when the recipe calls for a high amount of sugar or large amount of baking soda or powder, high oven temperature, small development of gluten during mixing, and/or a greased cookie sheet.

Storing Cookies

For short-term storage, store soft cookies in a tightly-covered container. To add moisture, add a fresh-cut apple to the container daily. Crisp cookies should be stored in a container with a loose-fitting lid. You can crisp-up cookies before serving them by warming them in a 300° F oven for five to ten minutes. For lengthy storage of bar cookies, wrap each individually in clear plastic or aluminum foil.

Cookies can be frozen for up to one month, at which time they tend to lose their flavor. Freeze cookies in an air-tight container and thaw at room temperature at least one hour before serving.

By Sandra Bastin, PhD, RD, LD
Extension Food and Nutrition Specialist
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