

The Facts on Fats and Heart Health

Fat is a touchy subject in our culture. At one time, it was grouped with sweets at the very top of the food pyramid. During the fat-free food boom of the 1970's through the 1990's, fats were not discussed very much. The general rule was to "use sparingly" and "limit intake". Knowing that 1 gram of fat provides 9 calories, compared to protein and carbohydrates where 1 gram provides 4 calories, it made sense to limit the amount of fat in our diets to lose weight. However, eating more carbohydrates and protein without the balance of fat leads to weight gain. We learned later that avoiding fats completely meant missing out on some of their great health benefits.

Now that low-fat diets are not trending and people are including fats as part of a healthful, balanced diet, there is a lot of confusion about what fats to choose in a Healthy diet. This newsletter will explore the various types of dietary fat, where to find them and why we should include certain fats in our diet.



TYPES OF FATS

- **Trans Fats- Avoid These**

This is the one type of fat that should be avoided completely. Trans fats are created by a process called hydrogenation. This occurs when hydrogen is added to vegetable oil to make it solid.

Hydrogenation gives foods a longer shelf life. This change in structure makes these fats easily build up in our bodies and raise LDL (bad) cholesterol levels.

Where to find them: Baked and fried foods, stick margarine and some snack foods, such as popcorn.

- **Saturated Fats- Avoid or Limit These**

Saturated fats are solid at room temperature. They will raise your LDL (bad) cholesterol level. Too much LDL cholesterol can put you at risk for stroke or heart problems.

Where to find them: Most saturated fat comes from animals, such as milk, cheese and meat. Bacon fat, marbling in steak, ribs and chicken skin are all examples of saturated fat. There are also a few plant oils, such as coconut and palm oils that are solid at room temperature. These plant oils are high in saturated fat.

- **Unsaturated Fats-Include These**

Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are types of unsaturated fats. These fats are mostly found in oils from plants and fish and are liquid at room temperature. Cutting back on saturated fat in your diet, while substituting unsaturated fats will reduce your risk for heart disease.

Monounsaturated fats may help lower your LDL cholesterol and keep HDL (good) cholesterol levels high.

Where to find them: Monounsaturated fats are found in olive oil, canola oil, nuts, and avocados.

Polyunsaturated Fats may lower triglycerides, another type of fat in the blood that puts you at risk for heart disease. Omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids are both polyunsaturated fats. They are called essential fatty acids because they cannot be made in the body. People are generally able to eat enough foods that provide omega-6 fats, but omega-3 fats are found in fewer foods. People who are unable to get omega-3 fats through their diet may choose to take an omega-3 supplement.

Where to find them: Omega-3 fatty acids are found in fatty fish, which are salmon, sardines, herring, anchovies and mackerel. Other sources are canola oil, flaxseed and walnuts. Omega-6 fatty acids are found in corn, soybean, and vegetable oils.



- **Limit Saturated Fat-** Look for foods with **less than 2 g saturated** fat per serving.
- **Choose low-fat and fat-free dairy products**
- **Choose lean cuts of meat-** Buy meats with less marbling and ground meat that is at least 90% lean.
- **Use oils in place of butter, lard, or other solid fats**
- **Aim for 2 servings of fatty fish per week**
- **Don't be fooled by "reduced fat"**-They have less than the original version, but may still be high in fat.

MORE ON OMEGA-3 FATS

It's best to get nutrients from food when possible. Omega-3 fats are also found in eggs from chickens fed a diet high in omega-3 fatty acids. If you are vegetarian or vegan, walnuts, flax seeds, chia seeds, and canola oil are also sources of this fat. Flax seeds and chia seeds should be ground to access their omega-3 oils.

Taking an omega-3 supplement is equal to having 2 servings of fatty fish per week. Omega-3 supplements contain fats from fatty fish, krill, algae, and other foods high in omega-3's. Check with your doctor before starting any supplements. Omega-3 fats play a role in blood clotting and may not be suitable for people with certain health conditions.

FAT FIBS

Butter is better.

Butter is high in saturated fat. An oil that is liquid at room temperature is a better alternative. Tub or spread margarine on bread is a good choice instead of butter. When your goal is to lower your LDL cholesterol for heart health, margarines are a better option. They contain less saturated fat than butter and are preferred by the American Heart Association. Look for margarine with 0 grams trans fats. Butter is **not** better.

Coconut oil is a heart healthy fat.

Coconut oil is high in saturated fat. It raises our LDL cholesterol, which contributes to heart disease. Despite the high praise surrounding this tropical oil, it's best to limit it in your diet.

CURRENT DIETARY FAT RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Avoid Trans Fats-** Check the nutrition label and look at the ingredients list. Foods with *partially hydrogenated oils* also have trans fats, even if the label says it's free of trans fats.



BOTTOM LINE

Fats are an important part of a balanced diet. Using liquid oils in place of solid fats has been shown to be beneficial and protective against cardiovascular disease.

Because fats contain the most calories in the smallest amounts, it's important to watch the amount of fat we add to our foods and the amount of high fat foods we eat. They can add up quickly.

To learn more about fats and where they fit into the 2015-2020 dietary guidelines visit: health.gov.

References

- Chapter 1 Key Elements of Healthy Eating Patterns." A Closer Look Inside Healthy Eating Patterns - 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines, health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015
- *The Skinny on Fats*, American Heart Association, heart.org

Need a Dietitian?

Registered Dietitians are here to help you with your nutrition questions. To make an appointment call 412.692.4497 (Oakland location) or 412.623.2421 (Shadyside location).