

FOCUS ON FATS

Nutrition News You Can Use



Learn the facts about fats and understand the role they play in a healthy diet

Not all fats are bad. Fat is actually essential to a healthy diet. Without some fat the body would not be able to work properly. Fats provide energy and help us absorb important vitamins and nutrients. But there are two basic problems with fat in our diets. The first problem is well known — there's too much total fat in the foods we eat. However, the second problem is one that many of us are not aware of. Most of us are eating the wrong kinds of fats. Specifically, too much 'bad' fat, and surprisingly, too little 'good' fat — the kind that can actually reduce your risk of heart disease and other health problems.

It's important to understand how much fat is recommended in a healthy diet and also to understand the difference between 'good' fats and 'bad' fats.

How much fat do I need?

The American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society recommend that no more than 30% of our daily calories come from fat. For most of us that's about 65 grams of total fat per day. This may sound like a lot, but everyday foods can quickly add up to even more. For example, one piece of fast food fried chicken or a single oversized cookie can contain as much as 25 grams of fat. Healthier alternatives like a grilled chicken sandwich or pasta with tomato sauce can have about 10 grams or less.

Reducing the fat in your diet can be a great way to help lose weight or maintain a healthy weight. That's because fat has more than twice as many calories as either protein or carbohydrates. But research shows that there is a big difference between types of fat. Some fats increase the risk of heart disease, cancer and other serious health problems. Others, in moderation, actually improve our health.

How do different fats affect our body?

Fats are referred to as 'good' or 'bad' based on their effects on our health. Unsaturated fats (both polyunsaturated and monounsaturated) are beneficial forms of fat that promote heart health. These fats help improve blood cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease. Unsaturated fats can be found in fish, vegetable oils, avocados, nuts and seeds. Saturated fats however can worsen blood cholesterol levels and increase the risk of heart disease. Saturated fats are found mainly in meat, poultry, butter, whole milk, and coconut and palm kernel oils. It is important to limit saturated fats in your diet.

What about trans fats?

The major source of trans fat in the diet is partially hydrogenated oil. Trans fats have been shown to have a negative health impact similar to saturated fats. Studies have shown that trans fat can actually increase your levels of bad cholesterol (LDL) while decreasing the good cholesterol (HDL) in our bodies. For this reason it's important to limit your intake of foods containing partially hydrogenated oils.

The good news is that due to heightened awareness of the health risks associated with trans fat, many processed foods are now zero trans fat (that is, they contain less than 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving). However, it's still important to choose carefully to minimize the amount of both saturated fat and trans fat in your diet.

How do I avoid saturated and trans fats?

You can avoid saturated and trans fats by eating less fried and more grilled, broiled or baked foods like chicken breast and fish. When you do choose fried foods, make sure that they are fried in zero trans fat oil.



Our dietitians receive hundreds of questions each year about a wide variety of nutrition topics. Their timely and trustworthy insights and ideas can help you and your family live healthier lives.

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Select lean cuts of meat and low fat dairy products. Sauté foods in healthy zero trans fat oils such as olive, soybean, or canola. Limit high calorie sauces and dressings that are filled with butter and cream. Either put them on the side to control the portion size or avoid them altogether. Use healthy oil and vinegar dressings for your salads. Desserts can also be a source of saturated or trans fat. Make sure baked goods like brownies, cookies, cakes, and pies do not contain partially hydrogenated oils.

Fresh is always best!

Fruit salads with melon and berries are available year round and have no trans fat. Seasonal fruits such as peaches, nectarines, or cherries are a healthy treat for a snack or dessert!

The salad bar is loaded with fresh choices that are fat free. Carrots, celery sticks, broccoli or cauliflower with a fat free dip are great as snacks or appetizers. Steamed or roasted vegetables topped with herbs or lemon juice instead of butter are also a great choice. With fresh fruits and vegetables you avoid saturated and trans fats and also get the benefit of antioxidants and fiber.

Use labels as a guide!

When you eat packaged foods, check the nutrition facts panel for the amount of fat per serving. Also look for health claims and check the ingredient listing. Messages on product labels may not tell the whole story. Many lower fat items can be high in calories and some zero trans fat products can still contain some partially hydrogenated oil.

Learn the facts and make informed choices about the foods you eat.

How do I get more healthy fats in my diet?

Most 'good' fats come from fish, nuts, vegetable oils and some other plant foods like avocados. Eating more of these foods is a great way to increase the amount of healthy fats in your diet. Healthy fats are a great way to add flavor. Dip whole grain breads in olive oil, prepare vegetable fried rice in canola oil, sprinkle salads with vinaigrette, snack on trail mix with nuts or seeds and dip your baked chips in guacamole made with ripe avocados.

What about Omega-3's

Omega-3's are a kind of unsaturated 'good' fat that is found mainly in fatty fish like salmon and trout. Omega-3's have been receiving a lot of attention because studies show that they can reduce the risk of heart disease. The effect of omega-3's can be powerful. Recent studies have shown that eating two servings of fish with high levels of omega-3 each week can reduce the risk of heart disease by more than 30%. In addition to fish, omega-3's can also be found in vegetable oils, nuts and seeds like canola oil, walnuts and flaxseed. Fortifying some foods with omega-3s is becoming a trend, with omega-3 eggs and spreads now common on store shelves. Fortified foods can help you get more omega-3s, but experts generally conclude that supplements or fortified foods shouldn't replace a well balanced diet that naturally provides omega-3s and other important nutrients.

Remember that the amount of fat and the kind of fat in the foods you choose is important. Try to eat more 'good' and less 'bad' fats by choosing lean meats, low fat dairy, fish, nuts, healthy vegetable oils and other foods with unsaturated fats. By understanding the facts about fat you can take an important step towards better health.



Since everyone's health history and nutritional needs are so different, please make sure that you talk with your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.