

FAT & OIL FACTS

NEW-LIFESTYLES STEPS TO A HEALTHIER YOUSM

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Most of us know what fat is--it's that component in food that we should always avoid, right? Most of us assume that fat is only good for causing weight gain and clogging the arteries of our heart, causing cardiovascular disease and a host of other problems. Well, as we'll find out from the facts, fat is also something our bodies need to stay healthy.

What is fat?

Fat is a naturally occurring nutrient found in foods like butter, oils, meats like beef and pork, dairy products like milk and cheese and nuts. Fruits and vegetables, on the other hand, are foods that have nearly no fat content.

What is the role of fat in our diet?

Believe it or not, fat is actually an important part of a healthy diet. It has its own role to play in providing a source of energy for our bodies and in keeping us healthy. In young children, fat is especially essential to the proper development of the brain and nervous system. That's why health professionals instruct parents to serve young children whole milk, which has more fat, during their first two years of life. Parents transition their children to low-fat or non-fat milk when they are older, past their early development period.

In both adults and children, fats help to absorb, transport and store vitamins known as fat-soluble vitamins. It is important to note, however, that only a minimal amount of fat is necessary for this process. Fats also help to store energy in the body for later use, are responsible for insulating nervous system tissue and are the building blocks of hormones.

Fats also aid in cooking by helping to conduct heat through food. In breads, cookies and other bakery goods, fat is what makes these foods tender and gives them a pleasant consistency. Fats and oils generally enhance the flavor of food. The bottom line--fat is just plain hard to refuse because it can taste so good.

So, fat may or may not be the enemy. Health and nutrition professionals would say that some fats are better choices than others. Made up of tiny units called fatty acids, each type of fat or oil is a mixture of different fatty acids. These varied fatty acid configurations account for the differences in types of fat--saturated, unsaturated, trans fat and so on. A diet with fat sources coming mainly from nuts, lean meats and heart-healthy oils is on the right track. Here's how to choose the right kind of fat and stay within healthy limits of the daily fat recommendations.

What is saturated fat?

Saturated fats are found in animal products such as meat and poultry, butter, cheese and milk (the exception is skim or non-fat milk) and in tropical oils such as palm, palm kernel and coconut oils. Tropical oils are typically found in store-bought baked goods and other commercially-made products. At room temperature, saturated fats are usually solid in form. Health professionals warn against consuming too much saturated fat because it can raise blood cholesterol, thus increasing the risk of cardiovascular (heart) disease.



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What is unsaturated fat?

As the name suggests, unsaturated fat is the polar opposite of saturated fat. Unsaturated fat can actually improve blood cholesterol by increasing good HDL cholesterol levels and decreasing bad LDL cholesterol levels, and it may be good overall for the heart. Found in plant foods (like seeds and nuts) and fish, the best sources of unsaturated fats are olive, peanut and canola oils, salmon and tuna.

Unsaturated fats can be further divided into two main categories-monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats. **Monounsaturated** fats are liquid at room temperature and are thus found in vegetable oils, like olive, peanut and canola oils.

Polyunsaturated fats are liquid or soft at room temperature and are found both in vegetable oils, like safflower, sunflower, corn, canola, soybean and flaxseed oils, and in seafood. Obtained through the foods we eat, the fatty acids which compose polyunsaturated fats (linoleic and alpha-linolenic acid) are called essential fatty acids because they are necessary for making hormones and helping to form the structure of our cells.

What is trans fat?

Found in store-bought, packaged foods, fried foods, snack foods and in sticks of margarine, trans fats are often listed on nutrition labels as the ingredients "hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oil or vegetable shortening."

Although some trans fatty acids (or trans fats) occur naturally in some foods, they are mostly created by processing vegetable oils from their liquid form into solids like margarine or vegetable shortening.

Hidden in many different types of food, trans fats are just recently popping up on food labels-making their presence known to the general public. Like saturated fats, eating too much trans fat can raise bad LDL cholesterol, lower good HDL cholesterol and increase the risk of heart disease. Since the Institute of Medicine published a report on trans fats finding them to be detrimental to heart health, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is requiring that by January 1,

2006, food companies must list trans fats on nutrition fact labels. Some food products are ahead of the curve and are already labeling their packages with trans fat information or as "trans fat-free."

What is dietary cholesterol?

Dietary cholesterol (or cholesterol found in the animal products we consume in our diet) is different from the blood cholesterol that occurs naturally in our body. If our levels of blood cholesterol are too high, dietary cholesterol and other fats can build up in the arteries of our heart and blood vessels, sticking to the artery walls and causing blockage and life-threatening heart conditions. For this reason, it is important for people to keep the amount of dietary cholesterol they consume to a minimum.

What is olestra?

Approved for use in certain snack foods by the FDA in 1996, olestra is a fat with a unique chemical composition. Proctor & Gamble developed olestra because, unlike traditional fats, it adds no fat or calories to food. While this sounds like a foolproof idea, olestra is not without complications, as it may cause abdominal cramping and digestive issues, and it generally impedes the body's absorption of some fat-soluble vitamins and nutrients. For this reason, the FDA is requiring products using olestra to be properly labeled and to also have added as ingredients vitamins A, D, E, and K.

How much fat should we consume daily?

According to nutrition experts, adults and children over the age of 2 should get less than 30% of their daily calories from fat. At least ten percent of calories need to come from fat in order to get the fat soluble vitamins - A, D, E, and K and the essential fatty acids we need to stay healthy.

It is important to remember that fat contains more than twice the number of calories (nine calories per gram) than the other food nutrients-carbohydrates and protein, each of which has 4 calories per gram. So, when we consume more fat in our diet, we are automatically consuming more overall calories too. This is probably why people fear fat the most due to its greater influence on weight gain.

The basic recommendation is to try to limit saturated fats in your diet, eliminate trans fats and replace them with unsaturated fats like olive and canola oils.

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