



What You Should Know About... Fats In Your Diet

For your body to function properly, it needs *some* fat. The challenge is picking the right types of fat. “Bad” fats (*saturated* and *trans* fats) can raise blood cholesterol levels, which may be harmful to your heart. “Better” fats (*polyunsaturated* and *monounsaturated* fats) can lower cholesterol and may be healthier for your heart. Reducing your daily fat intake is not a guarantee against developing heart disease, but it does help to reduce your risk. This page focuses on the *fats* found in the foods you eat and on the impact that they have on your cholesterol level and your heart health.

Q What’s so bad about saturated fats?

Saturated fats in the diet increase cholesterol levels in the body, and thus may increase your risk for developing heart disease. They are found mainly in animal products (meat, poultry, whole-milk dairy products, lard), but can also be found in certain vegetable products (palm and coconut oils, and cocoa butter).

Q What are trans fats?

They are “partly hydrogenated” vegetable oils (also known as *trans-fatty acids*) used in commercially baked goods (cookies, crackers, cakes) and by most restaurants and fast-food chains. Those fries, onion rings, and doughnuts that taste so good are usually made with trans fats. Trans fats are also found in most stick – but not liquid – margarines.

Q What should I know about polyunsaturated fats?

Polyunsaturated fats tend to help your body get rid of newly formed cholesterol. They are found in certain fish and in safflower, sesame, soy, sunflower, corn, and cottonseed oils. **Omega-3 fatty acids**, a special type of polyunsaturated fat that may play a major role in preventing heart disease, are found in many cold-water fish such as salmon, mackerel, and herring and, to a lesser extent, in green leafy vegetables, soybeans, nuts, and flaxseed and canola oils.

Q Are monounsaturated fats healthy?

Some experts consider monounsaturated fats to be the most desirable of all fats. They are mostly present in olive, canola, and peanut oils, in avocados, and in most nuts. If your diet is already very low in saturated fats but your cholesterol readings still are unfavorable, monounsaturated fats may help to reduce your LDL-C (your “bad” cholesterol) and to raise your HDL-C (your “good” cholesterol).

Q How should all of this affect my daily diet?

On a typical day, US adults eat a diet containing about 34% fat. Current recommendations are to keep total fat intake between 20% to 35% of total daily calories. Saturated and trans fats should not exceed 10% of total daily calories in healthy people; the remaining 20% should be equally distributed between polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. People who have heart disease, diabetes, or high LDL-C should limit their saturated fat to less than 7% of total calories.

Q Is it true that there may be “hidden” fats on nutrition labels?

Yes. Nutrition labels on products must indicate the amount (in grams) of trans fats contained in one serving. But food labels can be deceiving: a product claiming to be “trans fat free” or listing “0 gram trans fat” doesn’t exactly mean it’s harmless. In fact, food manufacturers are allowed to list amounts of trans fat with less than 0.5 gram (1/2 g) as 0 g (zero). Look for the words “partially hydrogenated vegetable oil” or “shortening” in the ingredient list. These fats should also be avoided.

ALL FATS ARE NOT EQUAL

One teaspoon of *any* type of oil, butter, or other fat contains about 45 calories. So, in that sense, all fats are equal. But your heart health is better served by dipping bread into olive oil than by smearing it with butter!

IN CLOSING...

Other items of interest and importance:

- ▶ About two-thirds of cholesterol in the body *does not* come from cholesterol in food but is made by the liver. So you can really only control your cholesterol level to a certain extent. That’s why people need cholesterol-lowering medication even though they’ve tried to improve their diet.
- ▶ Of all dietary changes, limiting saturated fat intake is the most important step you can take to reduce your cholesterol level and your risk for CHD.
- ▶ “Butter lovers” should opt for liquid margarine, which is not hydrogenated, or “trans-fatty-acid-free” margarine.
- ▶ Fat substitutes such as cellulose gel, guar gum, and gum arabic have been used for decades in many commercial foods, and are generally recognized as safe. However, less is known about newer synthetic fat substitutes such as olestra.

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