

# Fats in the Diet: Good and Bad Recommendations for a Healthy Diet

## Are all fats bad?

Not all fat is bad. Some fat in the diet is needed for good health.

- Fat provides calories, which give you energy.
- Fat is used by your body to make hormonelike substances that control blood pressure and other heart functions.
- Fat helps the body absorb fat-soluble nutrients such as vitamins A, D, E, and K. Certain antioxidants are also absorbed much better if fat is present. (Antioxidants help keep the body's cells healthy.)
- Some fats found in plant oils and fish can help prevent chronic disease.
- In addition, fats and oils add flavor, aroma, and texture to food, helping it taste good.

Most fats are found in meat, poultry, fish, dairy products, plant oils, and processed foods.

One problem with all fats is that they are very high in calories (9 calories per gram as compared to 4 calories per gram in carbohydrates and protein). Eating more calories than your body can use causes weight gain. Weight gain increases your risk for developing health problems. These health problems include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer, gallstones, and gout.

## Which fats are the bad fats?

Harmful fats include saturated and trans fats. Experts recommend that the saturated fat in your daily diet provide no more than 10% of your total calories. Also, you should keep trans fats as low as possible.

- Saturated fats are found mainly in animal products such as meats; poultry (mostly in dark meat and skin); whole and partially skimmed dairy products, including milk, cheese, ice cream, butter, and sour cream; and lard. Eating too much saturated fat is strongly related to higher cholesterol levels. Meals high in these fats can also cause sudden increases in triglycerides and other blood fats. This, in turn, decreases blood flow through the arteries and heart.
- Trans fats can be found naturally in some animal products, but most of the trans fats in our diet are manufactured from polyunsaturated oils. The process is called "hydrogenation." It is done to keep fat from going rancid and to change the form of the fat from a liquid to a solid. Hydrogenated fats are used in stick margarine, processed foods, and many commercially baked and fast foods such as ice cream, cakes, cookies, chips, shortening, popcorn, and French fries. Hydrogenated fats (trans fats) may be even more dangerous for the heart than naturally occurring saturated fats and may be associated with some cancers. Food manufacturers must now list the amount of trans fats, along with saturated fat, on the Nutrition Facts label of packaged foods.
- Tropical oils (palm, coconut, and cocoa butter) are also high in saturated fat, but it is not known if these fats have a harmful effect on the heart.

## What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance that has both good and bad effects on the body. Your body uses cholesterol to make hormones and to build and maintain nerve cells. However, when your body has too much cholesterol, deposits of fat called plaque form inside blood vessel walls. The blood vessel walls thicken and the vessels become narrower (a condition called atherosclerosis). This change in the blood vessels reduces blood flow through the blood vessels, possibly leading to heart attacks or strokes.

You can get cholesterol by eating animal products such as meat, eggs, and dairy products. However, cholesterol is not an essential part of the diet because your liver makes cholesterol from other nutrients you eat (fats, carbohydrates, and proteins).

Eating a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol can help lower high blood cholesterol and improve the blood flow through your arteries. A low-fat diet and regular exercise will help decrease your risk of heart attack and stroke. It can also help you lose weight if you are overweight.

### **Which fats are good fats?**

Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats are good or beneficial fats and oils. Some of these fats are considered essential, meaning that they are necessary for health. Polyunsaturated fats are found mostly in fish and plant oils such as safflower, corn, soybean, sunflower, and cottonseed. Monounsaturated fats are found mainly in canola, olive, and peanut oils, as well as most nuts.

Recently a lot of attention has been given to some of the fatty acids that make up poly and monounsaturated fats. Three very important fatty acids are called omega-3, omega-6, and omega-9.

- Omega-3 fatty acids are found in fish and some plants. They are good for heart health. They may reduce the risk of stroke, high blood pressure, and other chronic disease. Good sources are oily fish such as salmon, mackerel and tuna. You can also get fish oil supplements, but you should check first with your health care provider taking these supplements. Good plant sources for omega-3 fatty acids are canola oil, soybeans, flaxseed and certain nuts (especially walnuts and almonds).
- Omega-6 fatty acid is found in corn, safflower, soybean, and sunflower oils.
- Omega-9 fatty acid is found in olive oil and canola oil.

Getting some of these good fats is healthful, but many Americans eat too much and become overweight. It is likely that the balance of fatty acids is very important. The American diet typically contains too much omega-6 fatty acid and not enough omega-3 fatty acid.

### **How much fat do I need in my diet?**

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that you:

- Get no more than 20 to 35% of your total calories from fat.
- Get less than 10% of your calories from saturated fat. For example, if you eat 2000 calories a day, you should eat no more than 20 grams (g) of saturated fat. If you have heart disease, less than 7% of your calories should be from saturated fat.
- Avoid or limit trans fats (often found in processed foods).

- Eat less than 300 milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per day (less than 200 mg if you have heart disease).

### **How can I cut down on the fat in my diet?**

You can cut down on the fat in your diet by eating fewer high-fat animal products, such as red meat, poultry with skin, whole-milk dairy products, and fried foods. Be aware that even healthy fats, such as oils, nuts, seeds, and avocado, are high in calories and should be eaten in limited amounts. Eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Start thinking about eating less fat when you shop for groceries. Try to follow these suggestions:

- Read food labels.
- Choose sour cream, cream cheese, cheese, yogurt, and milk products that are nonfat or low fat.
- Replace butter and margarine with canola or olive oil, which are healthier fats. Choose fats and oils that contain less than 2 g of saturated fat per tablespoon. Continue to watch your portion size because all fats are high in calories.
- Buy only lean cuts of meat, such as poultry breast without skin; pork tenderloin; flank, round or sirloin beef; and low-sodium ham.
- Cook lean. Bake, broil, grill, steam, microwave, and sauté foods instead of frying them.
- Have a meatless dinner a few times a week. Beans are a great alternative to meat.
- Use low-fat or fat-free salad dressings. Try a flavored vinegar on your salad. It contains no fat and has lots of flavor.
- Try to have cookies and desserts only as a special treat, not every day. Prepare baked desserts at home, using healthy oils, egg whites, and fruit purees.
- Steam vegetables with herbs in the microwave, or sauté them in a small amount of healthy oil or cooking spray, instead of cooking them with butter.
- Avoid trans fats by choosing fewer processed foods and checking labels for saturated fat and trans fat content.
- Eat fish at least 2 times a week (not fried).
- Fast food can be very high in total and saturated fat. Try not to eat a lot of it, and choose grilled chicken or a salad with fat-free or low-fat dressing. Ask for nutrition information brochures from fast-food restaurants so that you can choose wisely.
- For a healthy snack, choose fresh fruits or yogurt instead of high-fat fried snacks or sweets.

Not all fat is bad, but it can be unhealthy if you eat too much. Become aware of the amounts and kinds of fat in your diet. Reducing the fat in your diet can be your first step to a healthier diet and a healthier you.

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