

Food for thought – fats, are they good or bad?

It's crucial to distinguish between the three main types of fats:

saturated, unsaturated, and trans fats. Foods containing fat have a mixture of these three, and chemically they're all pretty similar, but they seem to do different things to the body.

Saturated fats are usually solid at room temperature. High levels are found in animal-based foods such as red meat (beef, bacon), poultry and full-fat dairy milk, butter and cheese. Some plant-based foods, like coconut and palm oil, are also high in saturated fat.

In contrast, *unsaturated* fats typically remain soft or liquid at room temperature. These are more likely to be found in high levels in fish and certain vegetables. There are two types: mono-unsaturated fats (found in olive, peanut, and rape seed oils, avocados, almonds, pecans, pumpkin, sesame seeds, etc.) and polyunsaturated fats (found in fish and seafood, sunflower, safflower, corn, soybean, and flaxseed oils, walnuts, and flaxseeds).

Finally, there are trans fats. These can appear naturally in some foods, such as beef and lamb. But the trans fats that dieticians worry about tend to be industrially produced. They're made when vegetable oil goes through a process called hydrogenation; foods high in artificial trans fats include frozen pizzas, pies, margarine and spreads, ready-made frosting and some fried foods and snacks.

We need fat in order to live. It serves many vital functions, providing energy for the body and helping with the absorption of vitamins and minerals. However some fats are better for the body than others.

The state of the science on fat

Most experts now agree that the 1980s-era recommendations about switching to a low-fat diet were not supported by science. In fact, researchers today generally don't think the total amount of fat you eat has much effect on obesity and heart health (**so long as you're eating healthy foods and not consuming too many calories**).

Instead, they focus on what types of fat we should eat. Artificial trans fats appear to be extremely harmful, which is why they're now being banned from foods. Unsaturated fats, like those found in vegetable oils and fish, appear to have some health benefits. Saturated fats fall somewhere in between. We've also learned that other types of ingredients, such as the highly refined carbohydrates that are found in cakes, biscuits and fizzy drinks, can actually be just as unhealthy as 'bad fats.'

Now, this doesn't mean it's OK to eat cheeseburger and chips every day. What it does mean, however, is that not all fats are bad and that fat can certainly be part of a healthy diet.

Replacing saturated fat with unsaturated fat is fine, replacing it with sugar isn't

It's probably helpful to think of the various fats on a spectrum. Numerous studies have found that when people swap out their saturated fats for unsaturated fats (especially polyunsaturated fats, like those found in fish) they reduce their risk of coronary heart disease.

This *doesn't* justify any 'low-fat' diet, however. Studies have also found that when people swap out saturated fats for more refined carbohydrates, their health doesn't improve. Whilst it's probably a good idea to replace a cheeseburger with fish or lentils, it's not necessarily a good idea to replace an egg with a low-fat muffin or bagel.

So ... what should I be eating?

The original public health message was to eat less saturated fat, which got dumbed down to 'Eat less fat'. That was misguided. The evidence actually says replace saturated fat with unsaturated fat.

All foods with fat contain some mixture of the three types and we can't separate a conversation about fat from talk of food and calories. If you're getting too much energy (i.e. too many calories) from food, you'll gain weight and be worse off no matter what you're eating.

It has been observed that the Japanese have great health outcomes, as do some Mediterranean countries and many other places in between - very different societies with vastly different diets. Scientists have concluded that the common thread through all of this is Michael Pollan's haiku: 'Eat food, mostly plants, not too much.' When people eat healthier diets they enjoy better health, and it doesn't have anything to do with how much carbohydrate or protein or fat they eat.

What this means for you:

Stay away from foods that are high in trans fats; you're better off eating foods rich in unsaturated fat instead of saturated fat. But there doesn't seem to be any need to worry about your total fat intake. As long as you're eating a variety of real foods, rather than highly processed ones, and no more calories that you're burning, you're on the right track!

Reference: <http://www.vox.com/2015/11/24/9782098/dietary-fat-saturated-fat-good-or-bad>

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