



The “Skinny” on Fat

It’s impossible to go to the supermarket and not see numerous claims about fat on the bags and boxes of our favorite foods.

These foods appeal to us because we want to lose weight, eat more healthily, or just make smarter food choices for our families – so we stock our cupboards with “fat-free” this and “low fat” that. And if the latest “fad” diet tells us to cut out the fat, we do ... even if we don’t know exactly why.

It’s no wonder we’re confused. Is it okay to eat any fat? How much? Which kinds of fat are the most harmful? Are low-fat foods really any better for us?

What *is* fat?

What’s the first thing you look for when scanning a Nutrition Facts food label? If you’re like many people, your priority is checking out the product’s total fat grams.

There’s more to the fat content of the foods you eat than just the total amount, however. Believe it or not, fat does serve a purpose in good nutrition. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that fats and oils are part of a healthy diet; it’s the type of fat (and total calories eaten and expended) that makes a difference to your heart health and weight.¹

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), fats are a group of chemical compounds that contain fatty acids (the terms “fat” and “fatty acids” are often used interchangeably).² There are three main types of fatty acids: saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated.

In addition, trans fats, also known as trans fatty acids, are fats formed when liquid oils are made into solid fats, such as shortening and hard margarine. Small amounts of trans fats are also found naturally in some animal-based foods, such as butter, milk, cheese, beef, and lamb.

The good news about fat

Fat receives a great deal of media attention these days – and most of it isn’t good. But the fact is, fat is essential for proper growth, development, and overall good health. It’s a major source of energy for the body and aids in the absorption of several key vitamins. It also provides taste and consistency to the foods we eat and helps us feel full.

Unsaturated fats – monounsaturated and polyunsaturated – are beneficial when consumed in moderation. In its “Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005,” the USDA recommends that most of the fat you eat should come from sources of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids, such as fish, nuts, and vegetable oils (excluding palm, palm kernel, and coconut oils, which are high in saturated fats).

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Why is fat “bad” for you?

There’s a reason so many food products now offer “low-fat” and “fat-free” alternatives, and why packages now point out the specific amounts of saturated and trans fats contained in their products.

According to the USDA, a high intake of saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol (a waxy substance that occurs naturally in tissue) increases the risk of unhealthy blood lipid levels, which may increase the risk of heart disease.

Both saturated and trans fats raise low-density lipoprotein (LDL) – or “bad” – cholesterol. Saturated fats can be found in foods such as fatty cuts of meat, poultry skin, butter, whole milk and cream products, fried foods, baked goods, and other processed foods. You can find trans fats in foods such as vegetable shortenings, many margarines (particularly stick margarine), crackers, candies, cookies, snack foods, fried foods, baked goods, and other processed foods made with partially hydrogenated vegetable oils.

Most of us eat too much saturated fat and trans fat. When our fat intake is high, we also have a tendency to consume too many calories – which can lead to weight gain.

How much fat *should* you eat?

The USDA offers the following recommendations for daily fat intake in its “Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005”:

- Less than 10 percent of your total caloric intake should come from saturated fats. Daily intake of dietary cholesterol should be no more than 300 mg. Keep your consumption of trans fat as low as possible.
- Keep your total fat intake between 20 percent and 35 percent of your total calories, with most fats coming from sources of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats (such as fish, nuts, and vegetable oils).
- When selecting and preparing meat, poultry, dry beans, and milk products, make sure labels include the words “lean,” “low fat,” or “fat free.”

For children and adolescents, the USDA suggests:

- Ages 2 to 3 – Keep total fat intake between 30 percent and 35 percent of total calories.
- Ages 4 to 18 – Keep total fat intake between 25 percent and 35 percent of total calories.

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Just as for adults, children and adolescents should acquire most of their fats from monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, such as fish, nuts, and vegetable oils.

How to limit your fat intake

When you're eating out...

Ask for a nutritional breakdown of the foods on a restaurant's menu – whether you're grabbing food to go or sitting down to eat. In addition, many restaurants offer nutritional information on their Web sites, allowing you to do your own "detective work." Or check out your local bookstore for guides that provide nutritional breakdowns of many popular restaurant dishes.

Remember – when you're dining out, you can always request that your food be prepared with less fat or a different type of fat.

Read the Nutrition Facts food label.

Compare similar products to determine which ones have the smallest amount of total fat, saturated fat, and trans fat. Just be sure the serving sizes are similar in order to achieve an accurate comparison.

Choose alternative fats.

Replace saturated and trans fats in your diet with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.

- Monounsaturated fats include olive, canola and peanut oils, nuts, and seeds.
- Polyunsaturated fats include soybean, corn, and sunflower oils and foods such as fish, nuts, and seeds.

Choose vegetable oils and soft margarines.

Vegetable oils (except coconut, palm, and palm kernel oils) and soft margarines (liquid, tub, or spray) contain lower combined amounts of saturated and trans fats than in solid shortenings, hard margarines, and animal fats such as butter and lard.

Consider fish.

Most kinds of fish are lower in saturated fats than meat. Some fish – such as mackerel, sardines, herring, and salmon – contain omega-3 fatty acids that may even protect against heart disease.

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Limit foods high in dietary cholesterol.

Foods high in dietary cholesterol include liver and other organ meats, egg yolks, shrimp, and full-fat dairy products such as whole milk.

Choose foods low in saturated and trans fats.

Foods low in saturated fats include “fat-free” or “1 percent” dairy products, lean meats, fish, skinless poultry, whole grain foods, fruit, and vegetables.

Remember: Eating too much fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, or sodium may increase your risk of certain chronic diseases such as heart disease, some cancers, and high blood pressure.

Although the focus of this handout is fat, it's important to look at the sodium content and total calories in a particular food as well. Just as too much fat in your diet can have negative consequences on your health, so can sodium. It's common for food manufacturers to slash the fat content of a food and add in sodium to “enhance” the flavor. Eating too much sodium can elevate your blood pressure, or further aggravate high blood pressure – placing you at risk for heart attack and stroke.

In addition, many foods labeled “low fat” are nearly equal in calories to their full-fat counterparts because manufacturers lower the fat content but increase sugars or refined carbohydrates.

The bottom line? Read food labels to help make wise food choices.

Fat and your weight

Weight loss comes down to the total amount of calories you consume and expend. So why do we hear so much about fat in relation to diets? Maybe because fat has more than twice the calories per gram of food than protein or carbohydrate.

Foods that are high in fats are energy-dense; in other words, you can rack up a lot of calories from eating a small amount of food. Try to save such high-energy (high-calorie) foods for special occasions – those times when you know you'll be eating foods with higher fat content than your everyday foods.

In the meantime, make low-calorie, nutrient-rich foods commonplace in your diet – such as fruits, vegetables, skim or 1 percent milk, low-fat yogurt, broth-based soups, and salads. Not only are these foods lower in fat, they're also bursting with vitamins and minerals essential for a healthy diet. Ask your doctor or a dietitian for other examples of low-fat foods.

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Counting up your daily fat

The table below illustrates recommended amounts of total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, monounsaturated fat, polyunsaturated fat, and cholesterol (according to your daily total calorie intake) – using 30 percent of calories from fat.³

CALORIE LEVEL	TOTAL FAT (G)	SATURATED AND TRANS FAT (G)	MONOUNSATURATED FAT (G)	POLYUNSATURATED (G)	CHOLESTEROL (MG)
1600	53	12-18	18-27	18	300
1800	60	14-20	20-30	20	300
2000	67	16-22	22-33	22	300
2200	73	17-24	24-37	24	300
2500	83	19-28	28-42	28	300
3000	100	23-33	33-50	33	300

FOR MORE INFORMATION

About fats and their impact on your diet – and your body – visit the USDA's Web site at www.usda.gov, and the FDA's Web site at www.fda.gov. Be sure to talk to your doctor about your specific diet and exercise needs.

1 United States Department of Agriculture. www.usda.gov. 13 July 2005. – Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005. www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/ 12 Jan 2005.

2 U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) – www.fda.gov. – Questions and Answers About Trans Fat Nutrition Labeling. Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. 1 August 2005. <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/qatrans2.html>

3 Duyff, R.L., MS, RD, CFCS. The American Dietetic Association's Complete Food and Nutrition Guide. Minneapolis, MN:Chronimed Publishing. 1998.

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