

# FAT: The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly

## > The Good Fats:

Some fat in your diet is needed for good health. Fat provides calories, which give you energy. It is used by your body to make hormone like substances that control blood pressure and other

heart functions. Certain antioxidants are also absorbed much better if fat is present.

(Antioxidants help keep the body's cells healthy) As well, fat helps the body absorb fat-soluble nutrients such as vitamins A, D, E, and K. Most fats are found in meat, poultry, fish, dairy products, plant oils, and processed foods. Some fats found in plant oils and fish can help prevent chronic disease, and in addition, fats and oils add flavour, aroma, and texture to food helping it taste good.

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 healthcare 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.



## A Word to the Wise

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

In addition, even though some fat is essentially good for you, all fats are very high in calories (9 calories per gram as compared to 4 calories per gram in carbohydrates and protein). Weight gain is caused by eating more calories than your body can use. Gaining weight increases your risk for developing health problems including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer, gallstones, and gout.

### > 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. In addition, 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.



## > The Ugly Fats:

Trans fats are ugly, and although they can be naturally in some animal products, 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.



## The Good and the Bad of Cholesterol

**Cholesterol** is a fatty substance that has both good and bad effects on your 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 thus causing the walls to thicken and the vessels to 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).

## What You can do to Balance Fat Intake:

- Eat a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol (improves blood flow through your arteries).
- Regular exercise (will help decrease your risk of heart attack and stroke). It can also help you lose weight if you are overweight.
- Get no more than 20-35% 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 (found in processed foods).
- Eat less than 300 milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per day (less than 200 mg if you have heart disease).
- 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. Nuts, seeds, and avocado should be eaten in limited amounts. Buy lean cuts of meat, or have a meatless dinner a few times a week. Beans are a great alternative to meat.
- Read food labels for saturated fat and trans fat content. 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, and choose ones that contain less than 2 g of saturated fat per tablespoon.
- Cook lean, bake, broil, grill, steam, microwave, and sauté foods instead of frying them. Use low fat or fat-free salad dressings, and try flavoured vinegar on your salad.
- Have cookies and desserts as a special treat. Try preparing 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.
- Eat fish at least 2 times a week (not fried).
- Avoid fast food, or choose grilled chicken or salads. Ask for nutrition information brochures from fast food restaurants so you can choose wisely.
- Choose fresh fruits or yogurt instead of high-fat fried snacks or sweets.
- Remember that not all fat is bad, but as with anything, 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 and regular exercise can be your first step to physical wellness and a healthier you!

Tip for the week:

**Make it a point to cut down on processed foods!**