

The Nutritionist's Corner

Fats: The Good, Bad & Ugly

In today's society, people have a tendency to have a negative association with the word *fat*. When asked what comes to mind when they hear the word, people lean toward fried foods, full-fat butter, ice cream, brownies, and many of the foods that do in fact have negative effects on the body and when **consumed in excess** and could, in fact, make *us* "fat". Is this a problem? In some cases, yes. High fat intake can lead to increased levels of obesity, which have steadily been growing in the past few decades, as well as many other health issues. However, some fat in the diet is not only *not bad*, but it is *necessary* to make our bodies the well-oiled, properly functioning machines that they should be.

The confusion often comes from the discrepancy between *dietary fat* and *body fat*. Dietary fat, which provides 4 calories per gram, can be either unsaturated fats, saturated fats, or trans fats, and is a necessary dietary component (and does **NOT** correlate directly with body fat). Our bodies are made to process and metabolize some fats efficiently for energy storage, insulation of organs, and other functions.

The Good

Some fats in the diet are crucial for optimal health and improved metabolic function. Fats help your body absorb some vitamins and minerals that are essential for proper growth, development, and maintenance. Fats should make up about 25% of total calories.

Monounsaturated fats found in plant oils help to lower the bad cholesterol (LDL cholesterol) and may help raise the good cholesterol (HDL cholesterol). Polyunsaturated fats in the form of Omega 3 fatty acids, found in fish oils, lower the risk for heart attack and cardiovascular disease. Healthy fat sources include:

- Peanuts and peanut butter
- Walnuts, almonds, and other tree nuts
- Olives and olive oil

- Avocados
- Fatty fish like salmon

The Bad

Saturated fats, such as the solid, white fat you can find on meat, contribute to the buildup of fats in arteries. While they can absolutely be consumed in moderation, it is important to understand that foods containing saturated fats should be limited. You can find saturated fats in full-fat dairy products like butter, pastries with a high fat content (like brownies), skin on meat, and the solid fat on steak, pork, turkey, or other meats.

The Ugly

Trans fats are chemically altered fats that have no known positive health benefits. Trans fats lower HDL (good) cholesterol *and* raise LDL (bad) cholesterol, increasing the risk for heart disease and other complications. Trans fats are added to foods to replace other fat sources, like butter and oil, to increase shelf life. You may find trans fats in baked goods, snacks, and fried foods. Although trans fats have been eliminated from most foods, be aware: manufacturers have a loophole that allows them to sneak in trans fats (in the form of hydrogenated oils) into their products. If the product has less than 0.1 grams of trans fats per serving, then it can still claim "0 grams trans fats." Looking to avoid trans fats? Read the ingredients list on food products. Foods that include the words "partially hydrogenated" or "hydrogenated" oils do in fact have trans fats in them.

Fats are an essential part of the diet. Try to fit a small amount of the "good" fats (mono- and polyunsaturated fats) at each meal. Just be aware of those fats that may be harmful to your health.

Learn more about healthy eating habits at www.mypyramid.org