

Good Fats, Bad Fats

Most people think of fat in the diet as unhealthy and fattening, but actually most fats are healthy and an important part of a healthy diet. Fat is a major source of energy, it provides and helps you absorb some vitamins and minerals. It is needed to build cell membranes, the vital exterior of every cell in your body and brain, and the sheaths surrounding nerves. Fat is essential for blood clotting, muscle movement, and inflammation.

Fats can be classified as saturated, mono-unsaturated, poly-unsaturated and trans fats. In reality, all fats are actually a mixture of these different types rather than being purely one type, but we often label a fat by the most prevalent type of fat that it contains. Fats and oils are essentially the same thing. Fats tend to be solid at room temperature and oils tend to be liquid at room temperature. The collective term for fats and oils is lipids.



Fat doesn't make you fat

Fat contains 9 calories per gram compared to just 4 calories per gram for protein and carbohydrate. This knowledge led to the idea that (if you follow the old calories in vs calories out model of weight management) fat makes you fat, and to lose weight you should eat less fat. There was also some shoddy science from the mid 20th century which asserted that not only does fat make you fat, but it also causes heart disease. From this point on, the food industry began to invest heavily and profit from the low-fat mantra. However, if you follow a low-fat diet, assuming the amount of protein you eat remains stable, you will end up eating a proportionally high carbohydrate diet (or you will be very very hungry!). A high carbohydrate, low-fat diet tends to lead to overeating to try to gain some satisfaction (satiety), and cravings for more food. Foods which are marketed as 'low fat' tend to be high in carbohydrate and often have even more sugar added to make them palatable. A high carbohydrate (and high sugar) diet is associated with Type 2 Diabetes, heart disease, cancer, weight gain and fatty liver disease.

Fat makes food taste good and it makes food more satisfying. Adding more fat to food (whilst reducing sugar and carbohydrates, especially refined carbohydrates) is better for weight loss, reduces hunger and cravings, and makes food more enjoyable too. It's win win!

Saturated Fats

Saturated fats are typically found in animal sources such as meat, cheese, butter, eggs, and their associated fats such as ghee, lard, dripping and goose fat. Coconut oil is a vegetarian saturated fat. These fats are important in a healthy diet and can be used as a source of fuel. Eating them does not cause heart disease and they don't make you fat. Saturated fats are ideal for use in cooking because they can handle high heats without being damaged and converted into harmful trans fats (see below).



Mono-unsaturated Oils

Mono-unsaturated oils are found in olive oil, avocado and nuts. Olive oil contains the fatty acid omega-9 and can be used for gentle lower heat cooking, but in general mono-unsaturated oils should be used raw. The better quality the olive oil, the more it can handle the heat without being damaged.



Poly-unsaturated Oils

Poly-unsaturated oils are found in nuts, seeds and oily fish. This category includes the essential fatty acids omega-3 and omega-6. Essential fatty acids are so-called because they are essential to health and it is essential to get them from your diet because your body can't manufacture them for itself. Omega-3 fatty acids help to keep your heart healthy, raise levels of the beneficial HDL cholesterol and contribute to lower levels of triglycerides (circulating blood fats). They are also highly anti-inflammatory. Omega-3 fatty acids are found in oily fish, fish oil supplements, flaxseeds, walnuts and fresh green vegetables. Omega-6 fatty acids are found in other nuts and seeds and their oils (eg sunflower seeds and sunflower oil). Most people eating a standard diet get plenty of omega-6 fatty acids in their diet, whereas most diets lack adequate omega-3.

Poly-unsaturated oils should never be heated - this converts them into harmful trans fats.

Trans Fats

Trans fats are the unhealthy fats. They have no beneficial role at all, may contribute to heart disease and unhealthy cholesterol and should be avoided completely. They don't occur naturally and are only created in the food manufacturing process primarily to extend shelf-life of baked goods or by overheating poly-unsaturated and mono-unsaturated oils.

