



Fats



Health



Wellness



Nutrition



Support

Introduction

Fats are an important part of a healthy, balanced diet. We need some fats in our diet to help us absorb vitamins from food. They also contain essential fatty acids, which the body cannot make itself.

As with any nutrient, too much fat in our diet can be bad for our health. Foods that contain fat are higher in calories than carbohydrates and protein foods. This makes it easier to overeat fatty foods and gain weight.

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Types of fat

There are two main types of natural fat in our diet: saturated fat and unsaturated fat. A third type, trans fats, is less common - but, due to the rise in processed, man-made foods, we should keep a look out for this on food labels.

Saturated fats

Saturated fats are mainly found in animal products. This includes:

- meat (particularly red meat)
- processed meat e.g. sausages, bacon and salami
- eggs
- dairy products e.g. cheese, butter, milk, cream and lard

We need some saturated fat in our diet - but they are, in general, less healthy as they can raise our levels of bad cholesterol (LDL cholesterol) and increase the risk of heart disease. We should try to reduce the amount of fats we consume from animal food products.

Saturated fats are also found in baking (both sweet and savoury foods) due to the use of animal-based ingredients such as butter and eggs. This includes:

- cakes
- biscuits
- chocolate
- pastries
- pies

Unsaturated fats

Unsaturated fats are usually found in plant foods such as sunflower and olive oils, avocados, nuts and seeds. By replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats, we can help increase good cholesterol levels (HDL cholesterol).

As part of a healthy, balanced diet it is best to choose foods that contain higher amounts of unsaturated fat and lower amounts of saturated fat to reduce the risk of heart disease.

You can make healthier choices using food labels by looking for foods and drinks that show lower amounts of saturated fat, even if the total fat content is high.

Trans fats

Trans fats have been made by processing and hardening natural fats. This changes them chemically and there are no benefits to eating them.

These fats are not widely used anymore due to their harm to health, however they are not banned in the UK. So, when checking food labels, look out for the words 'partially hydrogenated' to spot a trans fat.

Choosing Healthier Fats

Smart swaps

Swapping saturated fats for unsaturated fats or other types of foods will benefit health. Try the following swaps in your meals for foods that are high in saturated fat.

Try swapping...	For...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Red or processed meat (e.g. sausages or bacon)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Chicken or turkeyFish (especially oily fish e.g. mackerel or salmon)Reduced fat sausages or burgers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Creamy or cheesy sauces	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Tomato or vegetable-based saucesA drizzling or olive oil and herbs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">CakesBiscuitsChocolate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Fresh or dried fruitUnsalted nuts and seeds
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Full fat dairy foods (e.g. milk, cheese, cream and yoghurt)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reduced fat cheeseSemi-skimmed or skimmed milkSoya, coconut or almond milk
<ul style="list-style-type: none">ButterLardCoconut oil	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Vegetable oilsOlive oilSunflower or rapeseed oilOlive spreadsMargarine
<ul style="list-style-type: none">PiesPastries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Hot potStewsVegetable or bean fillings

Why do people recommend coconut oil?

Coconut oil has become a popular product in baking and cooking as an alternative to oils and butter. It is a processed ingredient and popular as a result of very clever marketing of coconut oil as a 'superfood'.

Coconut oil is high in saturated fat (even higher than butter!) and therefore the health impacts of using too much are the same as any other saturated fat. For this reason, coconut oil should be used less often and health benefits can be seen by choosing unsaturated fats such as olive oils and spread instead.

Extra tips to reduce fat...

- ✓ Cook with vegetable oils and spreads e.g. olive oil, rapeseed oil and sunflower oil.
- ✓ Measure the amount of oil you use with a teaspoon, or use a spray bottle.
- ✓ Make your sandwiches healthier by using spreads made from vegetable oils.
- ✓ Use alternatives such as hummous or nut butters.
- ✓ Use lower fat cheeses like feta, mozzarella or half-fat cheddar, rather than cheeses such as halloumi and full-fat cheddar.
- ✓ Grate your cheese to make it go further in your meal. One portion of cheese should be the same size as the tip of your thumb.
- ✓ Check the amount of saturated fat on food labels to help you choose lower fat products.

Omega-3 fats

Omega-3 fatty acids are a type of unsaturated fat and are known as 'essential fatty acids' because our body cannot make them itself. We need to eat more of them as they are essential to prevent disease and maintain a healthy functioning body. Omega-3s are especially important during pregnancy to support the development of the growing baby.

The best sources of Omega-3s are oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, herring and sardines. You will get Omega-3 from other foods but in lesser amounts, so beware of clever marketing.

Nutrients are also always better from real food rather than supplements, so it's advised that we try to eat two portions of fish each week, including at least one portion of oily fish.

Butter or margarine?

There are advantages and disadvantages to both butter and margarine and, ultimately, the decision is an individual choice based on your specific needs.

Butter is an animal product and is high in saturated fat. Eating too much can increase the level of bad cholesterol which can build up in your arteries, causing them to become narrowed or blocked.

Margarine is a processed food that is designed to taste and appear like butter. Margarines are made from vegetable oils, which contain unsaturated fats that can lower our levels of bad cholesterol. If you do not have a high fat content in your diet then more natural foods could be considered better for us. However, most people often need to consider reducing their total fat and saturated fat intake.

Olive or sunflower spreads are also good alternatives to butter and margarine as they help to reduce our levels of bad cholesterol.

To support weight loss and maintenance, it's a good idea to reduce the amount of saturated fat in our diets by using unsaturated fat alternatives.

Understanding cholesterol

Previously, it was thought that eating foods containing cholesterol (e.g. eggs, prawns and crab) would raise our blood cholesterol. However, the total amount of saturated fat in your diet has more of an impact on blood cholesterol levels than worrying about certain foods that contain cholesterol.

You can enjoy eggs and seafood as part of a balanced diet and choose more unsaturated fat products overall.

Does eating fat make you put on weight?

Fatty foods can taste nice, but they are higher in calories and don't fill us up quickly. This means they can be easy to overeat, which can in turn contribute to weight gain.

If we reduce the amount of animal products, fried foods, takeaways, pastries and cakes we eat, we will lower overall fat intake to support weight loss or prevent weight gain. As with any nutrient, fat is essential for our bodies and can be enjoyed in moderation.

Are dairy foods bad for your heart?

Most of the fat in dairy foods is saturated fat, but more evidence is emerging that dairy foods may actually reduce your risk of heart disease. Dairy foods can form an important part of a healthy, balanced diet, as they also provide protein, calcium and other minerals.

It's still recommended that we choose lower fat versions of dairy foods most of the time, such as semi-skimmed milk, lower fat cheese and lower fat yoghurts, as these provide important nutrients but with fewer calories. Lower fat dairy products can be important for weight management. Limiting yourself to three portions of dairy foods each day will also help.

Final thought

Foods that are high in fat do not need to be avoided. However, they contain higher numbers of calories than other foods so we need to be careful not to overeat and should reduce the amount of processed food in our diet to help achieve this.

If you would like to learn more or require more information and support, please get in touch!

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