



Dietary Fat and Your Health

What is dietary fat?

Dietary fat refers to the fats and oils found naturally in animal and plant foods, and those used in cooking, at the table, and added to processed foods.

Dietary fat is made up of fatty acids. There are two types of fatty acids: saturated and unsaturated. Fats are called saturated or unsaturated depending on how much of each type of fatty acid they contain. For example, butter is a saturated fat because it has mainly saturated fatty acids. Olive oil is an unsaturated fat because it has mainly unsaturated fatty acids.

Saturated fats are solid at room temperature while unsaturated fats are liquid. Unsaturated fats are considered the healthiest type of dietary fat.

Why is fat important?

Dietary fat provides energy, and helps with nutrient absorption and brain and nerve function. Some unsaturated fatty acids are essential nutrients. This means that we need to get them from food because our bodies can't make them. Fats and oils also add flavour and texture to foods and make you feel full longer.

Amount of fat

Dietary fat provides a lot of calories in a small amount. Enjoying a moderate amount of healthy fat in your diet can help you feel satisfied after eating. It can also ensure that you get enough essential fatty acids.

A diet moderate in fat includes about 2 to 3 tablespoons (30mL to 45mL) of unsaturated oils. These fats can be used in cooking, baking, salad dressings and spreads each day. It also includes whole foods that contain fat, such as nuts, seeds and fatty fish.

Type of fat

The type of fat you eat is also important for your health. Choosing unsaturated instead of saturated

fats may help reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke.

What are some food sources of fat?

Unsaturated fat

There are 2 main types of unsaturated fats: monounsaturated and polyunsaturated.

Polyunsaturated fats include omega-3 and omega-6 fats.

- Sources of monounsaturated fats include peanuts, nuts, avocados, non-hydrogenated margarines, and oils such as olive, canola, peanut, sunflower and safflower
- Sources of omega-3 polyunsaturated fats include seeds (e.g. flax, chia and hemp), walnuts, canola oil, and oily fishes such as herring, salmon, mackerel and trout
- Sources of omega-6 polyunsaturated fats include most plant oils (e.g. soybean, sunflower, safflower), seeds, nuts, grains and non-hydrogenated soft margarines

Omega-3 and omega-6 fats are essential nutrients that we need to get from our diet. While most people get enough omega-6 fats, many people do not get enough omega-3 fats.

Saturated fat

Sources of saturated fat include red meats, full-fat milk and milk products (e.g. cream, cheese and butter), lard, shortening, palm, palm kernel and coconut oils, and some processed foods such as packaged snacks and sweets.

Saturated fat is found naturally in high amounts in many animal-based foods (except fish) and in tropical oils such as palm and coconut. It is also added to processed foods in the form of fully hydrogenated oils. Food manufacturers use a hydrogenation process to change an unsaturated liquid fat into a saturated, solid fat. Solid fats are often used in processed foods because they are less likely to go rancid, extending the shelf life of

packaged products. Read the food label to see how much saturated fat a food contains.

What is trans fat?

There are two sources of trans fat in the diet: natural and industry-made. Natural sources of trans fat are found in small amounts in milk and meat products and are not considered a health concern.

Industry-made trans fat is formed when an oil is partially hydrogenated. It is found in some processed foods. Eating even small amounts of industry-made trans fat on a regular basis can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.

As of September 17, 2018, industry-made trans fat can no longer be added to foods sold in Canada. Some food manufactured before this time may still contain industry-made trans fat. To identify trans fat in foods, check the ingredients list for words like “hydrogenated”, “partially hydrogenated,” “margarine”, or “shortening”. Read the Nutrition Facts table and choose products with zero grams of trans fat.

How do I include healthy fat in my diet?

At home

- Cook and bake with liquid oils, such as olive, canola, or vegetable oil. Use less solid fats such as butter, lard, shortening, coconut or palm oil
- Cook and bake from scratch using healthy fats more often than buying packaged, ready-made meals, snacks and desserts. Many packaged products that are low in unhealthy saturated and trans fat are still high in sugar, refined grains and sodium
- Use sesame or nut oils instead of butter to add flavour to foods
- Use fish, tofu, nuts, seeds or legumes in place of meat
- Serve healthy fats at the table
 - Drizzle olive, nut or seed oils over vegetables instead of using butter

- Use non-hydrogenated margarine or natural peanut, nut or seed butters as spreads instead of butter or cream cheese
- Use oil or yogurt-based salad dressings instead of cream or cheese-based dressings
- Choose yogurt, fruit, popcorn drizzled with oil, and unsalted nuts and seeds for snacks and desserts. Consume less ready-made pastries, cakes, doughnuts, ice cream and fried salty snacks
- Bake, broil, steam, poach, microwave, grill or stir-fry foods more often than deep frying
- Use more vegetables and smaller amounts of meat and cheese when making mixed dishes such as pizza, lasagna, tacos or spaghetti
- Buy lean cuts of meat such as top or bottom round roasts and steaks and loin cuts
- Use the Nutrition Facts table on food labels to select products that are lowest in saturated and trans fat

When eating out

- Ask your server for nutrition information and choose items that are lowest in saturated and trans fat
- Choose foods that are grilled, roasted, poached, sautéed or barbecued rather than deep-fried
- Order fish or legume-based entrees instead of meat or cheese-based entrees
- Order salads topped with nuts or seeds instead of cheese. Ask for a side of oil-based dressing
- For side dishes, choose a tossed salad with an oil-based dressing or vegetables instead of fries or Caesar salad

For More Information

For nutrition information, call **8-1-1** to speak with a registered dietitian, or visit www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthy-eating.

For more healthy eating information, visit [HealthLinkBC File #68a Heart Healthy Eating](#)