



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.

Most dietary fat is made up of fatty acids. There are 2 types of fatty acids: saturated and unsaturated. Dietary fats contain a mix of both saturated and unsaturated fatty acids. 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 gives you energy and helps with nutrient absorption and brain and nerve function. Some dietary fats provide certain unsaturated fatty acids that are considered essential, meaning that we need to get them from our diet. Dietary fats also add flavour and texture to foods and make you feel full longer.

Type of fat

The type of fat you eat is as important for your health as the amount of fat. Choosing unsaturated instead of saturated fats can help reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Amount of fat

Dietary fat provides a lot of calories in a small amount. Regularly eating or drinking more calories than your body needs can lead to weight gain. 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 of unsaturated oils used in cooking, baking, salad dressings, and spreads each day. It can also include nuts, seeds, and fatty fish.

In addition to a moderate amount of healthy fat, including the following foods in your diet will help promote health

and reduce your risk of chronic disease: vegetables, fruit, whole grains, legumes (lentils, peas, and beans), and lower fat milk products.

What are some food sources of fat?

Unsaturated fat

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

Omega-3 and omega-6 fats are polyunsaturated fats that are considered essential, and we need to get them from our diet. Most people get enough omega-6 fats because there are many different, commonly-eaten food sources. However, many people do not get enough omega-3 fats because there are fewer food sources to choose from.

- Sources of monounsaturated fats include: peanuts; nuts; avocados; olive, canola, peanut, sunflower and safflower oils; and non-hydrogenated margarines.
- Sources of omega-3 polyunsaturated fats include: flax, chia and hemp seeds; walnuts; and oily fish 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.

Saturated fat

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

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

What is trans fat?

Trans fat is a type of dietary fat that occurs naturally in some foods and is added to others. There are 2 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 harmful to health.

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

Many food manufacturers have removed partially hydrogenated oils from their products because of the risk to health from trans fat. However, some processed foods still contain partially hydrogenated oil. Foods that have the words “hydrogenated,” “partially hydrogenated,” “margarine,” or “shortening” listed in the ingredients may contain trans fat. Read the Nutrition Facts table and choose products with zero grams of trans fat.

Do I need to limit dietary cholesterol?

A small amount of dietary fat comes in the form of cholesterol. We do not need cholesterol as we make it in our body. Cholesterol is found in high amounts in egg yolks, organ meats, and some shellfish.

If you have diabetes, heart disease, or high blood lipids or fats, you may need to reduce the amount of cholesterol in your diet to help prevent heart attack and stroke. Speak with your health care provider about the type and amount of dietary fat and cholesterol recommended for you.

Eating a diet rich in vegetables fruit, whole grains and legumes that includes healthy fat is more important for heart health than limiting dietary cholesterol.

How do I include healthy fat in my diet?

At home

- Cook and bake with liquid oils, such as olive, canola, or vegetable oil, instead of using 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 saturated and trans fat are also high in sugar, refined grains, and sodium.
- Use sesame or nut oils instead of butter to add flavour to foods.
- Have meatless meals more often using 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 peanut, nut or seed butters as spreads instead of butter or cream cheese.
- Use oil-based salad dressings instead of cream, egg, mayonnaise, or cheese-based dressings.
- Choose yogurt, fruit, popcorn drizzled with oil, and nuts and seeds for snacks and desserts instead of ready-made pastries, cakes, doughnuts, ice cream, and fried salty snacks.
- Bake, broil, steam, poach, microwave, grill or stir-fry foods more often than frying or 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 healthier options. Choose products that have little saturated and trans fat, sodium and sugar, and more fibre and protein.

When eating out

- Ask your server for nutrition information and choose items that are lowest in saturated and trans fats.
- Choose foods that are grilled, roasted, poached, sautéed or barbequed 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.

For more healthy eating information, visit:

- Healthy Canadians Food and nutrition www.canada.ca/en/services/health/food-nutrition.html
- [HealthLinkBC File #68a Heart Healthy Eating](#)