

THE SKINNY ON DIETARY FATS

Framing the Fat Story

SATURATED FATS

Saturated fats occur naturally in many foods. The majority are found in animal sources, including meat and dairy products like whole milk and butter, though some plant-based oils, such as palm kernel oil and coconut oil, are also sources. Limit saturated fat intake to no more than 10% of total caloric intake, or about 22 grams a day for a 2,000-calorie diet.

What's the buzz about coconut oil?

Coconut oil has been getting a lot of media attention for its purported health benefits. Though coconut oil is a source of saturated fat, it is also a source of medium chain triglycerides (MCTs). MCTs are different from other types of fats because they are transported directly from the intestinal tract to the liver, where they are more likely to be burned off as fuel, meaning they are less available to be deposited in fat tissues. However, research to date is inconclusive about the health benefits of coconut oil, and, as with all fats in the diet, moderation is key.



POLYUNSATURATED FATS

Polyunsaturated fats occur naturally in many foods. The majority are found in plant-based liquid oils, though other sources include fatty fish, nuts, seeds and soy. While no specific amount is recommended for polyunsaturated fat intake, the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend eating foods rich in this good fat while staying within the Healthy U.S.-Style Eating Pattern of 27 grams from the oils food group (about 5 teaspoons) per day.

DHA, EPA, ALA—what's the deal with omega-3 fats?

Omega-3 fatty acids are considered “essential,” meaning the human body cannot produce them, so they must be consumed in the diet. They play a crucial role in brain function, normal growth and development, and heart health! Omega-3 fatty acids come in one of three forms: EPA, DHA and ALA. The health effects of omega-3 fatty acids come mostly from EPA and DHA, which are primarily found in fatty fish. Vary your diet and consider dietary supplements to ensure you are getting ample amounts of all forms of omega-3s.

MONOUNSATURATED FATS

Monounsaturated fats occur naturally in many foods. The majority are found in plant-based liquid oils, like olive, canola and almond oils, though other sources include avocados and many nuts and seeds. While no specific amount is recommended for monounsaturated fat intake, the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend eating foods rich in this good fat while staying within the Healthy U.S.-Style Eating Pattern of 27 grams from the oils food group (about 5 teaspoons) per day.

MAKE YOUR FATS MORE MEDITERRANEAN

Replacing saturated fats with plant-based or unsaturated fats like monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats may help lower heart disease risk factors, as has been observed in research examining the effects of Mediterranean dietary patterns¹. Just one ounce of heart-smart almonds contains 13 grams of unsaturated fat and only 1 gram of saturated fat, providing a convenient and versatile source of good fats². A hallmark of the Mediterranean diet is the consumption of MUFA-rich olive oil. Almonds also contain a high proportion of MUFAs, providing 9 grams per one-ounce serving (or about 50% of their total calories).

WHAT DO THE DIETARY GUIDELINES FOR AMERICANS SAY ABOUT FAT?

According to the 2015 Dietary Guidelines, Americans should shift food choices from those high in saturated fats to those high in polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. Recent meta-analyses have questioned the association between high saturated fat intake and the risk of cardiovascular disease³. It should be noted, however, that the 2015 Dietary Guidelines did not change the 2010 Guidelines' recommendation to limit saturated fat consumption to 10% of total energy intake.

NOT ALL FATS ARE EQUAL

Not surprisingly, we cannot judge foods by fat alone. It's important to look at the total nutrient package of foods (and the total diet) to determine their overall healthfulness. Here are three helpful tips:

1. Use mono- and polyunsaturated fats in place of saturated fats. Foods rich in these good fats, like olive and canola oils, may help lower your risk of heart disease.
2. Avoid low-fat versions of foods as they tend to be higher in sugar and sodium than their full-fat counterparts. Replacing saturated fat with refined carbohydrates and added sugars does not lower cardiovascular risk and may raise triglyceride and HDL levels!
3. Aim for an eating pattern that's filled primarily with whole foods that are minimally processed. Choose natural sources of good fats, including nuts, such as almonds, and fish, such as salmon.

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2015). Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Retrieved from <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/>.
2. Good news about good fats. Scientific evidence suggests, but does not prove, that eating 1.5 ounces per day of most nuts, such as almonds, as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease. One serving of almonds (28 grams) has 13 grams of unsaturated fat and only 1 gram of saturated fat.
3. Chowdhury R, Warnakula S, Kunutsor S, et al. Association of dietary, circulating, and supplement fatty acids with coronary risk. *Ann Intern Med* 2014; 160(6):398-406.

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SATURATED FATS

- MEAT
- FULL- AND REDUCED-FAT DAIRY PRODUCTS, LIKE MILK, CHEESE AND ICE CREAM
- BUTTER
- PALM KERNEL OIL
- COCONUT OIL

MONO UNSATURATED FATS

- OLIVE OIL
- CANOLA OIL
- NUTS AND NUT BUTTERS, INCLUDING ALMONDS AND ALMOND BUTTER
- AVOCADOS
- SESAME SEEDS AND OIL

POLY UNSATURATED FATS

- SOYBEANS AND OIL
- NUTS AND NUT BUTTERS, INCLUDING ALMONDS AND ALMOND BUTTER
- SUNFLOWER SEEDS AND OIL
- TOFU



OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS

- FATTY FISH, INCLUDING SALMON, MACKEREL AND TROUT
- CANOLA OIL
- MICROALGAE
- CHIA SEEDS
- FLAX SEEDS AND OIL

OMEGA-6 FATTY ACIDS

- SUNFLOWER SEEDS AND OIL
- SOYBEANS AND OIL
- SESAME SEEDS AND OIL
- CORN OIL

Love 'em or leave 'em? Get more good fats in your diet with this handy guide!

LOVE 'EM

Munch on a handful of almonds



LEAVE 'EM

instead of a handful of chips or pretzels

Sauté your veggies in olive oil



instead of butter

Grill up some omega-3-rich salmon



instead of deep-frying chicken

Spread avocado on your sandwich



instead of mayonnaise or thousand island dressing