Fats in the Diet, Good and Bad

Are all fats bad?

Not all fat is bad. You need to have some fat in your diet for good health because:

- Fat provides calories, which give you energy.
- Fat is used by your body to make hormones that affect blood pressure and other heart functions.
- Fat helps the body absorb some nutrients, such as vitamins A, D, E, and K. Certain antioxidants are also absorbed much better if fat is present. (Antioxidants help keep the body’s cells healthy.)
- Some fats found in plant oils and fish can help prevent chronic disease.

In addition, fats and oils add flavor, aroma, and texture to food, helping the food taste good.

Most fats are found in meat, poultry, fish, dairy products, plant oils, packaged foods, and snack foods.

One problem with all fats (even the healthy fats) is that they are very high in calories. Fats have 9 calories per gram of fat while carbohydrates or protein have 4 calories per gram. Eating more calories than your body can use causes weight gain. Weight gain increases your risk for developing health problems. These health problems include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer, gallstones, and gout.

Which fats are the bad fats?

- Saturated and trans fats are the more harmful fats. Saturated fats are mainly in animal products such as meats; poultry (mostly in dark meat and skin); lard, and whole and low-fat dairy products, including milk, cheese, ice cream, butter, and sour cream. Eating too much saturated fat can raise your cholesterol level and increase your risk of heart disease. Meals high in saturated fat can also cause sudden increases in triglycerides and other blood fats. This, in turn, decreases blood flow through the arteries and heart.

- Trans fats can be found naturally in some animal products, but most of the trans fats in our diet are made with a process called hydrogenation. It is done to keep fat from going rancid and to change the form of the fat from a liquid to a solid. Hydrogenated fats are used in stick margarine, some soft margarines, shortening, packaged foods, and many baked or fried foods and fast foods such as cakes, cookies, chips, popcorn, French fries, and ice cream. Trans fats may be even more dangerous for the heart than saturated fat and may increase the risk of some cancers. Food manufacturers must list the amount of trans fat and saturated fat on the Nutrition Facts label of packaged foods.
Tropical oils (palm, coconut, and cocoa butter) are also high in saturated fat, but it is not known if these fats have the same harmful effect on the heart as the saturated fat in animal products. Some tropical oils are less saturated than others. For now, the best advice is to eat as little saturated fat as possible.

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance that has both good and bad effects on the body. Your body uses cholesterol to make hormones and to build and maintain cells. However, when your body has too much cholesterol, deposits of fat called plaque form inside blood vessel walls. The blood vessel walls thicken and the vessels become narrow—a condition called atherosclerosis. This change in the blood vessels reduces blood flow through the blood vessels and can lead to heart attacks or strokes.

You can get cholesterol by eating animal products such as meat, eggs, and dairy products. Your liver also makes cholesterol from other nutrients you eat (fats, carbohydrates, and proteins).

Which fats are good fats?

Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats are good, or beneficial, fats and oils. Some of these fats are considered essential, meaning that you need them for good health. Polyunsaturated fats are found mostly in fish and safflower, corn, soybean, sunflower, and cottonseed oils. Monounsaturated fats are found mainly in canola, olive, and peanut oils, as well as most nuts.

Recently a lot of attention has been given to some of the fatty acids that make up poly and monounsaturated fats. Three important fatty acids are called omega-3, omega-6, and omega-9.

- Omega-3 fatty acids are found in fish and some plants. They are good for heart health. They may reduce the risk of stroke, high blood pressure, and other chronic disease. Good sources are oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, and tuna. Omega 3 fatty acids are also in fish oil supplements. Check with your healthcare provider before taking supplements. Fish oil supplements may cause bleeding in some people, especially if they are taken with blood-thinning medicines. Good plant sources for omega-3 fatty acids are canola oil, soybeans, flaxseed, avocado, and some types of nuts, such as walnuts and almonds.

- Omega-6 fatty acid is found in corn, safflower, soybean, and sunflower oils.

- Omega-9 fatty acid is found in olive oil, canola oil, and avocados.

It is likely that the balance of fatty acids is very important. The American diet typically contains too much omega-6 fatty acid and not enough omega-3 fatty acid.
How much fat do I need in my diet?

Eating some fat—especially the good fats—is healthy, but many Americans eat too much and become overweight. The current American Heart Association Diet and Lifestyle Recommendations are:

✓ Get no more than 20 to 35% of your total calories from fat.
✓ Get no more than 7 to 10% of your calories from saturated fat. For example, if you eat 2000 calories a day, you should eat no more than 15 to 20 grams (g) of saturated fat.
✓ Don’t eat trans fats at all or limit them to less than 1% of your calories.
✓ Eat less than 300 milligrams (mg) of cholesterol a day. If you have heart disease, you should eat less than 200 mg a day.

How can I cut down on the fat in my diet?

You can cut down on the fat in your diet by eating fewer high-fat animal products, such as red meat, poultry with skin, whole-milk dairy products, and fried foods. Even healthy fats, such as oils, nuts, seeds, and avocado, are high in calories and should be eaten in limited amounts. Eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Try to follow these suggestions:

✓ Read food labels.
✓ Choose sour cream, cream cheese, cheese, yogurt, and milk products that are nonfat or low fat.
✓ Cook with canola or olive oil instead of butter and margarine. Choose fats and oils that contain less than 2 g of saturated fat per tablespoon. Always watch your portion size because all fats are high in calories.
✓ Buy only lean cuts of meat, such as poultry breast without skin; pork tenderloin; flank, round or sirloin beef; and low-sodium ham.
✓ Cook lean. Bake, broil, grill, steam, microwave, and sauté foods instead of frying them.
✓ Have a meatless dinner a few times a week. Beans are a great alternative to meat.
✓ Use low-fat or fat-free salad dressings. Try a flavored vinegar on your salad. It contains no fat and can have lots of flavor.
✓ Try to have cookies and desserts only as a special treat, not every day. Prepare baked desserts at home, using healthy oils, egg whites, and fruit purees for sweetening.
✓ Steam vegetables with herbs in the microwave, or sauté them in a small amount of healthy oil or cooking spray, instead of cooking them with butter.
✓ Avoid trans fats by choosing fewer packaged convenience foods and checking labels for saturated fat and trans fat content.
✓ Eat fish, especially fatty fish, at least 2 times a week (not fried).
✓ Fast food can be very high in total fat, saturated fat, and trans fat. Try not to eat a lot of it. Choose grilled chicken or a salad with fat-free or low-fat dressing. Ask for nutrition information brochures from fast-food restaurants so that you can choose wisely.
✓ For a healthy snack, choose fresh fruits or yogurt instead of high-fat fried snacks or sweets.
Not all fat is bad, but it can be unhealthy if you eat too much. Eating a diet low in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol can help lower your blood cholesterol and improve the blood flow through your arteries. Eating less harmful fat and getting regular exercise will help lower your risk of heart attack and stroke. It will also help you keep a healthy weight or lose weight if you are overweight.