Nutrition: Fats

Fat is a necessary nutrient. The body needs fat to produce cell membranes, synthesize hormone-like compounds, and maintain healthy hair and skin. Fat is an energy source and is stored in ways that protect vital organs from damage.

Types of fat

All fats are not the same. Some fats are actually healthy:

- Unsaturated fats may be beneficial because they protect against fatty deposits on the artery walls. Unsaturated fats are either monounsaturated or polyunsaturated.
- Omega-3 fatty acid is a type of polyunsaturated fat that may be especially beneficial, and is found in cold water fish, flax seed, and walnuts.
- Monounsaturated fats are liquid at room temperature but may thicken when refrigerated.
- Polyunsaturated fats are also liquid at room temperature but stay liquid when refrigerated.

Harmful fats will increase the risk of heart disease:

- Dietary cholesterol is a waxy substance found in meat, poultry, milk, butter, and eggs. Our bodies produce cholesterol. Eating these animal products can increase the level of cholesterol in the blood but not as much saturated and trans fats.
- Saturated fat is solid at room temperature and can be found in the same foods as cholesterol - meat, poultry, milk, butter, and anything that includes coconut or palm oils.
- Trans fat is probably the most harmful of all fats. It is chemically manufactured by adding hydrogen to an unsaturated fat making it resistant to spoilage. It is a common ingredient in commercial baked items like bread, cookies, doughnuts, and cake. The majority of margarines contain trans fats.
- A new product called interesterified fat is replacing trans fats. Early research shows that this new fat may be more harmful than trans fat.

Eating too much fat can result in excess calories that lead to obesity and all its complications like heart disease, stroke, diabetes, sleep apnea, gall stones, and some cancers.
Goals for fats in American diets

- Total fat: The total amount of fat consumed should be 30 percent or less of the number of calories needed to maintain a desirable weight. The upper limit on the grams of fat in your diet depends on the calories you need. For example, at 2,000 calories per day, you should eat no more than 600 calories from fat (2,000 calories x 30 percent). You can convert fat calories to gram for easier tracking by dividing 600 by 9. This is equal to 67 grams of fat.

- Saturated fat: The amount of saturated fat should be less than 10 percent of the amount of calories needed to maintain a desirable weight. This upper limit also depends on the calories you need. For example, at 2,000 calories per day, you should consume less than 200 calories from saturated fat (2,000 x 10 percent). To convert to grams, divide 200 by 9 and the amount is roughly 22 grams.

- Cholesterol: Eating less fat from animal sources will help lower cholesterol as well as total fat and saturated fat in your diet. The goal for cholesterol is currently included in the goal for lowering total fat.

These goals for fats apply to the diet over several days, not to a single meal or food. Some foods that contain fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol, such as meats, milk, cheese, and eggs, also contain high-quality protein and are our best sources of certain vitamins and minerals. Choose low fat and lean versions of these foods.

Also, these goals are not for children under 2 years, who have special dietary needs. As children begin to eat with the family, usually at about 2 years of age or older, they should be encouraged to choose diets that are lower in fat and saturated fat and that provide the calories and nutrients they need for normal growth.

Advice for today

Have your blood cholesterol level checked, preferably by a doctor. If it is high, follow the doctor’s advice about diet and medication. If it is at the desirable level, help keep it that way with a diet low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol.

Eat plenty of vegetables, fruits, and grain products; choose lean meats, fish, poultry without skin, and lower fat dairy products.

For more information

Nutrition: [http://www.health.state.mn.us/nutrition/](http://www.health.state.mn.us/nutrition/)

Overweight and Obesity Prevention: [http://www.health.state.mn.us/obesity/](http://www.health.state.mn.us/obesity/)