

# Dietary Fat – the Good, the Bad and the Ugly



Should I use butter or margarine? Are nuts healthy? Is fat bad for my heart? What are omega-3 fats? Are you confused about fat? You are not alone. Dietary fat has been a hot topic for years and ongoing research has shown that not all fat is bad. In fact, some fat is good for you.

## Dietary fat and your health

Your body needs fat for many important functions. Therefore, healthy eating includes eating some fat. However, as fats and oils are high in calories portions should be small to prevent excess weight gain. Of greatest importance is the *type* of fat you choose. Saturated and trans fat may raise your risk of heart attack or stroke because they increase the “bad” LDL cholesterol in your blood. On the other hand, some unsaturated fats lower your risk because they lower the LDL cholesterol and maintain a protective level of “good” HDL cholesterol. Other unsaturated fats lower risk by lowering blood triglyceride fat and reducing excessive blood clotting.

## Getting to know fat

### The Good Fat – Unsaturated

All unsaturated fats are healthy. Replacing saturated and trans fat with unsaturated fats can help improve your cholesterol levels and lower your risk for heart disease and stroke. Unsaturated fats include monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. All liquid vegetable oils, nuts and seeds are high in unsaturated fat. The omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids found in fatty fish may also

lower blood triglyceride levels and improve immune and inflammatory disorders.

### The Bad Fat – Saturated

Much of the fat in animal products is saturated. Fatty meats and high fat dairy products such as cheese are the main contributors of saturated fat in our Canadian diet. Plant sources of saturated fat include palm kernel and coconut oil, plus manufactured hydrogenated vegetable oils. These saturated fats are commonly used in processed and packaged foods. The different types of saturated fat are currently being studied closely to determine which pose the greatest risk for heart health. Dietary cholesterol is also present in animal products. Foods such as eggs and shrimp contain cholesterol, yet are low in saturated fat and therefore can be enjoyed in moderation.

### The Ugly Fat – Trans

Trans fat is industrially produced when vegetable oils are partially hydrogenated. Trans fat not only increases your “bad” cholesterol but also decreases your “good” cholesterol, and is the most risky fat for heart disease. Trans fat may also increase blood vessel inflammation that increases risk for other chronic health problems. There are

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no known health benefits from industrially produced trans fat. Many Canadian food manufacturers are working to remove trans fats from their products.

### Limit the total amount of fat you eat

- Choose food products with less fat.
- Check the Nutrition Facts table on food labels and buy foods with a low amount of fat (grams or %) per serving; it is not necessary to always buy “fat-free” products.
- Use only a small amount of fat or oil in food preparation; avoid deep-frying.
- Reduce the quantity of fat used in homemade baking.
- Enjoy nuts and seeds in small portions.
- Limit spreads, dressings, rich sauces, gravies and high fat desserts and snack foods.

### Avoid trans fat

- Buy foods with zero trans fat or with the least amount of trans fat per serving.
- Read the ingredient list and avoid or limit foods made with partially hydrogenated vegetable oil or shortening.
- Limit commercial baked goods, crackers, cookies, biscuits, pies, waffles, snack foods and deep-fried fast foods that may be high in trans fat.

### Reduce saturated fat

- Limit shortening, hard or hydrogenated margarines, butter, and lard; only have gravy and other high fat sauces on occasion.
- Check the ingredient list on food labels and limit foods containing hydrogenated vegetable oil, shortening, coconut oil, palm kernel oil, beef tallow, suet, or cocoa butter. These ingredients are often found in commercial baked goods, crackers, chocolate bars, specialty coffees, non-dairy creamers and whipped toppings.

- Choose lean cuts of meat such as sirloin, loin, round, rump, and extra lean ground beef; trim off fat; remove skin from poultry; limit processed meats such as bologna, wieners, bacon, sausages, pepperoni.
- Choose skim or 1% milk, low-fat yogurt and “light” or part-skim cheeses; limit ice cream, regular sour cream, coffee cream and whipping cream.
- Look for the percentage of milk fat (%MF) on the label of dairy products and choose those with the lower percentage, for example cheese with less than 22% MF.

### Choose monounsaturated fat

- Use olive, canola or peanut oil in cooking and baking.
- Choose salad dressings and soft non-hydrogenated margarines made with these oils.
- Snack on a small handful of peanuts or nuts such as almonds and pecans.
- Sprinkle slivered or chopped nuts, or seeds on cooked vegetables and salads.
- Spread peanut butter or nut butters on toast and bagels instead of butter.
- Toss slices of avocado into a salad.

### Increase omega-3 fatty acids

- Enjoy two fish meals a week using fresh, canned or unbattered frozen fish.
- Choose fatty fish such as salmon, sardines, herring, mackerel and trout. Shellfish is also a good source of omega-3 fatty acids.
- Sprinkle ground flaxseed, wheat germ, walnuts or pumpkin seeds on cereal, yogurt, and salads; use them in baking.
- Use canola oil in cooking and baking; choose salad dressings and non-hydrogenated margarines made with canola or flax oil.
- Choose foods fortified with omega-3 fatty acids; food manufacturers may use terms such as omega-3, n-3, ALA, EPA, or DHA.

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