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Fat is not the enemy, you just need to understand it

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Fat is not always the enemy, but ignorance on the differences between good and bad fats is. Fat is a key element of a well-balanced diet, but has always had a bad reputation for being the key reason for weight gain.

With a little more research and education, the public can be made aware that there is a lot of misunderstanding about the types of fat that exist, as well as how fatty foods affect our bodies.

As it turns out, we need to consume fat as the body would not be capable of absorbing certain vitamins without help from fat. Therefore, you shouldn't eliminate fat from your diet, but you should educate yourself on the difference between the healthy and unhealthy varieties.

What is fat?

Fat is a rich source of energy, with 1 gram providing 37 kJ (9 kcal). Fat consists of building blocks known as fatty acids, and is categorised into three groups depending on their chemical breakdown: saturated, monounsaturated or polyunsaturated.

Some fats are important to be included in your daily diet, but others can cause serious health problems if overconsumed. To those who are on a weight loss programme, a key thing to note is that regardless of the type of fat, they all supply your body with the same amount of calories. This means that whether you consume good fat or bad fat, too much of any type will encourage weight gain.

Foods that are high in fat are called energy-dense foods, and unless you plan to work off those foods at the gym, too much energy-dense foods can lead to excess energy intake. This promotes obesity, which increases your risk of health conditions like heart disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer.

How much fat do we need?

The recommendations for maximum daily fat intake for adults are as follows: in males, total intake is 95 grams, with 30 grams being saturated; in females, total intake is 70 grams, with 20 grams being saturated fat.

In the UK, the Department of Health recommends that fat intake should not exceed 35% of one's total daily energy intake from food, and saturated fat should not be more than 11% of total energy intake from food. Amongst the population, the amount of saturated fat being consumed is too high, especially when we eat out at places that serve dishes that make heavy use of butter and fried foods.

The growing number of cafes all over the country means that not only are we eating *kuih* and *santan*-heavy desserts, but also cream cakes, biscuits and pastries, when those should only be consumed in small amounts, as such food affect blood cholesterol levels.

As a rule of thumb, men should eat not more than 30g of saturated fat, and women not more than 20g daily. Men and women who are overweight or obese not only need to consume even less of those totals in saturated fats, but also may find it helpful to reduce their overall fat intake in order to effectively lose weight and stop any further weight gain.

What types of fat should we be cutting back on?

Saturated fats – Saturated fat causes cholesterol levels to rise in our blood, and that increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. But even cholesterol has good and bad types: HDL (good) cholesterol and LDL (bad) cholesterol.

"Bad" cholesterol builds up in our blood vessels and causes them to harden and narrow, leading to increased occurrences of blood clots – the cause of heart attacks or strokes. On the other hand, "good" cholesterol acts as a "cleaning" agent by carrying the "bad" cholesterol off to the liver so that too much doesn't build up in the bloodstream.

There are many conflicting reports about fats and its consequences on one's health, but one thing is quite certain: saturated fat in excessive amounts is damaging to health, and many studies have shown a convincing link between saturated fat and increased risk of coronary heart disease.

The good news is many studies also indicate that replacing saturated fat with unsaturated fat reduces blood cholesterol and lowers the risk of heart disease and stroke. Foods with a higher proportion of saturated fats include fatty meats, full-fat dairy products and some processed foods. They tend to be solid at room temperature, such as butter and lard.

Trans fats – It seems like in the past few years, trans fat has been the number one enemy when it comes to health.

Trans fats are actually found naturally in meat and dairy products in small amounts, but it has been getting attention due to the much larger amounts found in the production of partially hydrogenated

vegetable oils. Trans fats produced in this way have been shown to have a more adverse effect on blood cholesterol levels than saturates.

But concern about the health implications of high intake of trans fats has led to changes in manufacturing practices in recent years and good progress has been made to remove these fatty acids from our food chain.

For example, fat spreads sold in the UK do not now contain partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. This has meant that average trans fatty acid intake in the UK diet is now well below the recommended limit and many foods are now free of trans fats.

What types of fat are healthier choices?

Unsaturated fats – All fats contain a mixture of saturated and unsaturated fatty acids, but choosing foods that contain higher amounts of unsaturated fat is the ideal choice for a health-friendly diet.

Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats – Unsaturated fats are made up mainly of unsaturated fatty acids and are usually liquid at room temperature. They help to maintain a healthy balance in your body's cholesterol levels and improve your cardiovascular system.

Monounsaturated fats are found in food items like olives, sunflower oils, avocados, nuts and seeds. Polyunsaturated fats provide us with essential fatty acids like omega-3 and are found in abundance in fish like salmon and mackerel.

Omega 3 fatty acids – As mentioned, polyunsaturated fatty acids contain high amounts of omega-3 and are found especially in oily fish like mackerel, salmon and sardines.

Omega-3 fatty acids are known to be associated with good heart health as they help prevent clotting.

Pregnant and breastfeeding women do much better with high amounts of omega-3 in supporting foetal and baby growth. Good sources include mackerel, salmon, sardines, herring, trout, fresh crab, and swordfish, and it is recommended to consume one portion per week.

How can we increase our intake of healthier fats?

With some discipline and conscious effort, this should not be too difficult. At the end of the day, saturated fat is damaging to health. It has been studied that the cultures with the longest and healthiest lifespans are those with diets with higher proportion of unsaturated fats, like the Japanese and Mediterranean diets.

To illustrate how easy it is to make small changes and cut back on saturated fat, here are examples of swaps you can make to reduce the amount of saturated fat in your diet:

- Swap whole milk and cream for lower fat dairy products like skimmed milk and reduced fat cheese.
- Swap fatty meat with lean cuts with no visible fat.
- Swap roasted and fried foods with grilled, steamed or baked foods.

While we need fat in our diet, we have to make wise choices that will be right for our health.

As such, take the time to read nutrition labels and avoid processed foods with hydrogenated oils. Now that you aware of the difference between good and bad fats, choose your foods using that knowledge. Your heart and waist will thank you for it.