

Facts about Fat

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Fat gives the body energy to work and helps the body function the way it should. It is one of the three nutrients that provides fuel for the body, along with protein and carbohydrates. There are many benefits



and functions of fat in the body, despite the common fear that many people may have about the nutrient. Once you know the facts about fat, you can make informed nutritious food choices.

Why fats?

Fat is important for many reasons within the body. Fats should be a part of a varied, nutritious diet because they:

- Are needed to absorb vitamins A, D, E, and K,
- Keep our bodies warm,
- Protect tissues and organs,
- Provide the body with energy,
- Play a role in hunger and fullness cues,
- Support brain health,
- Give structure to every cell in the body, and
- Help make certain hormones.

Not only does fat play an important role in the function of our bodies, but it also gives foods flavor and texture while helping us to feel full and satisfied after eating.

Types of fats

Not all fats are created equal. Foods containing fat have a mix of different types of fat. We tend to label foods based on which type of fat they have the most of. There are higher quality fats that provide the benefits listed above and more, and there are lower quality fats that do not have the same benefits. We can and should include a variety of fats in our diets, but choosing higher quality options when we have the opportunity benefits our health.

Unsaturated fats

Unsaturated fats are considered “heart-healthy” fats. These fats are mostly found in foods from plants and fish. Oils made of unsaturated fat are mostly liquid at room temperature. Unsaturated fats help to reduce inflammation and lower the risk for heart disease.

Unsaturated fat sources

- Canola, soybean, olive, and corn oils (vegetable oils)
- Avocados
- Almonds, peanuts, walnuts, pine nuts, pecans, and Brazil nuts
- Sunflower, pumpkin, flax, and chia seeds
- Salmon, sardines, oily fish
- Dairy products and eggs fortified with DHA

Saturated fats

Saturated fats are found in savory foods, like meat, butter, and cheese, as well as fried foods. They are also found in sweet foods like pastries, biscuits, and cakes. Saturated fats are typically solid at room temperature and usually come from animal sources. Plant sources high in saturated fat include coconut and palm oils. We want to limit the amount of saturated fat we take in from food and replace it with unsaturated fat when possible.

How much fat should I eat?

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that fats make up 20% to 35% of total calories you eat in a day. The recommendation also suggests that less than 10% of those calories come from saturated fats. By shifting our focus to incorporating

unsaturated fats, we can reduce how much saturated fat we eat over time. Some small shifts are listed below.

- Use olive or canola oil when sauteing or roasting vegetables rather than butter or margarine.
- Choose canned seafood as a convenient, shelf-stable source of unsaturated fats.
- Add nuts and seeds to your favorite yogurt or ice cream.
- Add avocado to toast, sandwiches, salads, soups, chili, and more.
- Grab a handful of nuts or trail mix as an afternoon snack.

Low-fat diets versus high-fat diets

You may have heard or read that lowering the amount of fat in your diet can help reduce the risk of heart disease or other health conditions. Rather than cutting out all fat, we want to prioritize unsaturated fats while limiting saturated fats. Packaged foods labeled nonfat and low-fat may contain less saturated fat but do not always contain unsaturated fats. Be mindful that these products often have added sodium or sugar as they are processed to make up for the flavor lost with the fat. By choosing fewer processed foods, we can naturally limit the amount of saturated fat in our diet.

One of the more common fad diets is the keto diet. This diet involves eating high-fat food sources with moderate protein and low-carbohydrate foods. This diet severely restricts carbohydrates from all sources, including fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. With this restriction, the body does not get its main source of energy and misses out on beneficial nutrients like fiber and antioxidants. Current science shows that high-fat diets, like keto, do not support sustainable weight loss over time.

Prioritizing any macronutrient while severely restricting another can result in a deficiency of

vitamins and minerals and can lead to long-term issues, like kidney stones and liver disease. A nutritious eating pattern includes fat, carbohydrates, and protein to provide our bodies with the benefits of each.

Some ideas for incorporating fats into meals and snacks using the sources from above are listed in the box.



Ideas for balanced fat intake

Breakfast

- Mashed avocado on whole-wheat toast with a fried egg (in a vegetable oil)
- Greek yogurt with fruit topped with pumpkin seeds and pecans
- Oatmeal made of whole-grain oats and milk with fruit, and walnuts
- Smoothie with avocado, milk, chia seeds, and a variety of fruits and vegetables

Lunch

- Turkey sandwich with cheese and avocado on whole-wheat bread
- Tuna wrap with hummus and carrots
- Whole-grain pasta with pesto sauce and shredded cheese

Dinner

- Stir-fry made with olive oil over brown rice
- Salmon with pasta and roasted vegetables using vegetable oil
- Leafy green salad with grilled chicken, nuts, sunflower seeds, fruit, cheese, olive oil, and vinegar

Snack

- Trail mix or handful of mixed nuts
- Cottage cheese and tomatoes
- String cheese and a piece of fruit

Fats may get a bad rap, but they are essential for our health. They provide us with energy, help absorb important vitamins, and support proper functioning in our body. A nutritious, balanced diet includes fats to help us feel full and satisfied. Reach for unsaturated fats, when possible, to enjoy the positive health benefits of heart healthy fats.

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