

# Facts on fats

Fats often have a bad reputation, but not all fats are bad. In fact, fats are needed to keep our bodies healthy. They help us absorb certain fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E and K), supply us with energy, insulate us from the cold, and are important for healthy skin and hair.

## Good fats

### **Monounsaturated fats**

One of the good fats, monounsaturated fats are usually liquid at room temperature and are generally in an oil form. Examples include olive oil, canola oil, and peanut oil. In studies, monounsaturated fats have been shown to lower total cholesterol and LDL (bad) cholesterol levels, while maintaining or increasing HDL (good) cholesterol levels. With these positive effects on cholesterol levels, monounsaturated fats may decrease your risk of heart disease.

### **Polyunsaturated fats**

Also a good fat and usually liquid at room temperature are the polyunsaturated fats. Examples include corn oil, soybean oil, sunflower oil, sesame oil, and safflower oil. Polyunsaturated fats have been shown to lower total cholesterol levels which may lower your risk of heart disease. Like monounsaturated fats, polyunsaturated fats are believed to reduce levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol but also lower HDL (good) cholesterol levels.

Also included in this group are Omega-3 essential fatty acids. These fatty acids are important to our health, but cannot be made by the body. They appear to reduce the risk of heart disease and boost the immune system. Omega-3 fatty acids are found in certain kinds of fish (such as salmon, albacore tuna, herring, mackerel, lake trout), as well as walnuts and flaxseeds.

## Terms to know

**Cholesterol-** a waxy, fat-like substance found in the blood and the body's cells. It is made by the body and also absorbed from foods we eat. High levels of cholesterol increase the risk of heart disease.

**Lipoproteins-** are carriers that move cholesterol from the blood into the body's cells.

**LDL-** low-density lipoprotein. This is the main carrier of harmful cholesterol in your blood. Also known as "bad" cholesterol.

**HDL-** high-density lipoprotein. HDL's carry cholesterol away from the arteries and protect against heart disease. Also known as "good" cholesterol.

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## Bad fats

### **Saturated fats**

Generally considered one of the bad fats, saturated fats are mainly found in animal products and just a few plant products. They are usually solid at room temperature. Examples include palm oil, coconut oil, and the fat in meat, dairy products, baked goods, and fried foods. Saturated fats raise total cholesterol levels and LDL (bad) levels, which may increase your risk of heart disease. Foods high in saturated fats are often also high in cholesterol, which may further increase heart disease risk. Some studies have suggested that some saturated fat may not be as bad as we once thought, however the general recommendation is to limit their intake.

### **Trans fats**

Trans fats are the very worst of the fats. A small amount of trans fat occurs naturally in some meat and dairy products, but most is artificially made. Trans fats are created by a chemical process that turns liquid vegetable oil into a solid fat. This process is called hydrogenation. Foods that can be high in trans fat include margarine, vegetable shortening, fast food, baked goods, and fried foods. Trans fats are different from the other fats in that they are not a necessary nutrient in our diets. Trans fats are unhealthy because they raise LDL (bad) cholesterol levels and lower HDL (good) cholesterol levels, increasing your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Food labels are allowed to say "0 grams of Trans Fat" even if they do contain a small amount (less than 0.5 grams per serving) of trans fats. If you eat more than one serving of that food, those trans fats will begin to add up. To know if a food has trans fats also look on the label for "partially hydrogenated oil", "hydrogenated", or "shortening". These terms tell you there are trans fats in that product.

## Fat Tips

- Both "good" fats and "bad" fats are high in calories. Even the heart-healthy unsaturated fats should be eaten in moderation. There is no need to add fat to your diet, instead replace saturated and trans fats with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.
- Use liquid oils instead of solid fats for cooking.
- Avoid processed foods and fast food.
- Soft or liquid margarines that do not have trans fats are generally a better choice than butter. Always check the food label for the amount of saturated and trans fat per serving.