

Fats: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Fat is a major source of energy for the body and aids in the absorption of vitamins A, D, E, K, and carotenoids. Both animal- and plant-derived food products contain fat, and when eaten in moderation, fat is important for proper growth, development and maintenance of good health. It is important to understand the difference between the various types of fats found in food.

The Good

Unsaturated fat, one of the two fats found naturally in food, is derived from plants and may help lower your blood cholesterol level when used in place of saturated fat in your diet. Some examples of unsaturated fats are canola, olive and peanut oils, avocados, sesame and sunflower seeds, corn and soybeans.

The Bad

Saturated fat, found naturally in animal products, is considered unhealthy in excess because of its association with atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), which can cause high blood pressure and heart disease. Saturated fat is the main cause of increased low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or “bad” cholesterol, levels. Some examples of foods that contain saturated fat are beef, veal, lamb, pork, lard, poultry fat, butter, cream, milk, cheeses and other dairy products made from whole milk, coconut oil, palm oil, palm kernel oil and cocoa butter.

The Ugly

Trans fat (also known as “trans-fatty acid”) or hydrogenated fat is made when manufacturers add hydrogen to vegetable oil, a process called hydrogenation. Hydrogenation increases the shelf life and flavor stability of goods containing these fats such as vegetable shortening, margarine, crackers, cookies, snack foods, and candy. Scientific evidence shows that consumption of trans fat raises LDL levels, which increases the risk of coronary heart disease.

The Food and Drug Administration requires trans fat content to be listed on the Nutrition Facts panels of all food products. Some examples of foods that contain trans-fatty acids are doughnuts, French fries, some margarines and pastries.