

Fats

Fats are an essential part of sound nutrition, but not all fats are the same. By understanding how fats work in the body, knowing the difference between saturated and unsaturated fats, and using the provided guidelines for daily fat consumption, you can eliminate excess fat from your diet and eat for better health.

What is Fat?

Fat is one of many essential nutrients. Dietary fat is the most “fattening” nutrient we eat. It provides 9 calories, units of energy, per gram. Carbohydrates and proteins each provide 4 calories per gram.

When dietary fat is digested, fatty acids are produced. One fatty acid, the essential linoleic acid, helps us absorb fat-soluble vitamins and minerals. It is also important for healthy skin and blood pressure regulation.

Dietary fat is divided into two types: saturated (which is solid at room temperature) and unsaturated (liquid at room temperature). In order to obtain an adequate amount of linoleic acid, one of the few fatty acids the body cannot produce on its own, the average adult needs to eat 1 tablespoon of unsaturated fat daily.

Saturated or Unsaturated?

Whether fat is saturated or unsaturated has to do with its chemical structure: whether or not there is room on the fat molecule for more hydrogen to bond to it.



Saturated fats are those that have no room on the molecule for additional

hydrogen: thus the term “saturated.” Saturated fats are found primarily in animal products - red meat, lard, butter, poultry with skin and whole milk dairy products. The vegetable oils palm and coconut are also saturated, as is vegetable shortening and margarine (“hydrogenated”). The consumption of saturated fats is linked to higher levels of damaging cholesterol, heart and blood vessel disease, and many types of cancers.

Unsaturated fats are fat molecules with double bonds, which have room for additional hydrogen. Unsaturated fats are found primarily in plant

products; monounsaturated fat in products like vegetable oils such as peanut, canola, and olive oil, and polyunsaturated fat found in sunflower, corn, and safflower oil. Oils are the major source of Vitamin E in typical American diets.

The mono- and poly-unsaturated fatty acids found in fish, nuts and vegetable oils have been shown to reduce cholesterol levels in some individuals, which in turn may reduce risk of cardiovascular disease.



How Much Do I Need?

General guidelines for daily fat consumption are to eat no more than 30% of your total calories from fat. Of that 30%, no more than one third, or 10% of the total diet, should be from saturated fats. If, for example, you normally consume 2,000 calories a day to maintain your weight and activity level, you would need no more than 600 calories from fat, or 66 grams.

30% of 2000 calories = 600 calories

600 calories ÷ 9 calories/gram = 66 grams fat

Of that 66 grams of fat, how many would be unsaturated and how many would be saturated? Following the general guidelines for fat consumption, 44 grams would be unsaturated and no more than 22 grams would be saturated.

Choose Sometimes

Eliminating all fat from a diet is unhealthy—fat is essential for multiple body functions like production of bile and hormones, insulation of organs, and absorption of vitamins. Instead of cutting out all fatty foods or snacks, choose those items sometimes or rarely instead of often.

On occasion choose items like burgers, ice cream, potato chips, donuts, pizza, chocolate, hot dogs, bratwurst, and full-fat dairy products.

Frequently choose often items like low-fat yogurt, skim milk, unbuttered popcorn, veggies, fruit, ice milk, whole wheat breads and bagels, veggie burgers and veggie pizza. In general, the less processed the food item, the healthier it will be.

