Nutrition Basics: Fat

Quick facts:

- Fat is an essential macronutrient that has many important functions, including supplying energy and essential fatty acids, aiding in the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins and carotenoids, maintaining the structure and function of cell membranes, supporting the immune system, supporting brain function and insulating and protecting internal organs.
- You only need a small amount of fat to meet your dietary needs.
- Unlike carbohydrates and proteins, one gram of fat contains nine calories; because of this, too much fat intake is linked with increased risk of weight gain.
- Consuming too much of the wrong types of fat may increase your risk of heart disease and other health problems.
- Recommendations suggest consuming 20% to 35% of your total calories from fat, with no more than 10% of your total caloric intake coming from saturated fats.

- The three different types of fat are unsaturated, saturated and trans fats.

    - *Unsaturated fats* are found in mostly plant- based products and help to improve cholesterol values. There are two types of unsaturated fats, mono- and poly-unsaturated fats. There are two types of essential poly-unsaturated fats, omega-3 and omega-6.

    - Examples of foods high in unsaturated fats are olive and canola oil, fatty fish (such as salmon, sardines, trout and mackerel), avocado, nuts and seeds (flaxseed, almonds, walnuts, pecans and pistachios) and soybeans.

    - Incorporate sources of omega-3 fatty acids, such as omega-3 rich fish, almond, walnuts, cashews, ground flax seeds and hemp hearts to support heart health and help manage cholesterol.

Saturated fats are found most often in animal products such as meats, poultry, eggs, dairy and cheese.

Saturated fats are also found in tropical oils, such as coconut, palm and palm kernel oil. Diets high in saturated fats increase your risk of heart disease by raising cholesterol levels.

Recommendations are to limit saturated fat to no more than 10% of your total calories.

Lowering calories from saturated fats to less than 7% can reduce your heart disease risk.

Trans or hydrogenated fats are synthetically made fats that are formed when liquid vegetable oils are processed using the hydrogenation process to produce semi-solid fats. Manufacturers use these products to make foods more palatable, increase shelf life, taste and texture.

Consuming trans fats significantly increases your risk of heart disease by raising your LDL cholesterol, lowering heart healthy HDL cholesterol and impairing blood vessel function.

The recommendation is to eliminate trans fats from the diet (less than 1% of your total caloric intake).

How to identify between good and bad fats?

Step 1:

First you must read the nutrition facts panel on the product package to determine if the product has a measurable amount of trans fats per serving. Look for products with zero grams of trans fats per serving.

Step 2:

Reading the food label is not adequate to determine if a product has trans fats in it. If the ingredient list contains the word "hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated," the product contains trans fats and you should select a different product. If you consume more than one serving of the product, you will be consuming a significant amount of trans fats.

- Limit your intake of processed foods such as crackers, cookies, cakes, pies, pastries, doughnuts, desserts and even processed peanut butters and whipped cream.

Fat goals for healthy eating

- No more than 20% to 35% of total caloric intake should come from fats.
- Limit saturated fats to no more than 10% of your total calories; further reducing your intake to no more than 7% of your total calories will reduce your heart disease risk.
- Aim to consume two to three tablespoons of healthy unsaturated fats per day.
- Aim to consume fat-free or low-fat yogurt, milk and cheese products. Lean meats such as skinless, boneless chicken, turkey, fish. Eggs or egg whites. Most of your fat intake should come from healthy, unsaturated, plant-based fats.
- MODERATION and PORTION are key; high-fat foods are high in calories, so portion size is important.
- If you are trying to lose weight, stick to four servings per day of added fats. One serving is one teaspoon of vegetable oil, butter or margarine; one tablespoon of nuts and seeds; one and a half teaspoons of nut butter; an eighth of an avocado; two teaspoons of salad dressing; or two teaspoons of mayonnaise.