

THE SKINNY ON DIETARY FATS

Framing the Fat Story

SATURATED FATS

Saturated fats occur naturally in many foods. The majority are found in animal sources, including meat and dairy products like whole milk and butter, though some plant-based oils, such as palm oil and coconut oil, are also sources. Limit saturated fat intake to as low as possible. For example, 10% of total caloric intake would be about 22 grams for a 2,000 calorie diet.

What's the buzz about coconut oil?

Coconut oil has been getting a lot of media attention for its purported health benefits. Although coconut oil is a source of medium chain triglycerides (MCTs), coconut oil is a source of saturated fat, which should be limited in one's diet. MCTs are different from other types of fats because they are transported directly from the intestinal tract to the liver, where they are more likely to be burned off as fuel, meaning they are less available to be deposited in fat tissues. However, research to date is inconclusive about the health benefits of coconut oil, and, as with all fats in the diet, moderation is key.



POLYUNSATURATED FATS

Polyunsaturated fats occur naturally in many foods. The majority are found in plant-based liquid oils, though other sources include fatty fish, nuts, seeds and soy. While no specific amount is recommended for polyunsaturated fat intake, overall fat consumption is recommended to be between 20-35% of one's daily energy intake according to European health authorities.¹ Unsaturated fats are encouraged while saturated fat intake should be as low as possible.

DHA, EPA, ALA—what's the deal with omega-3 fats?

Omega-3 fatty acids are considered “essential,” meaning the human body cannot produce them, so they must be consumed in the diet. They play a crucial role in brain function, normal growth and development, and heart health. Omega-3 fatty acids come in one of three forms: EPA, DHA and ALA. The health effects of omega-3 fatty acids come mostly from EPA and DHA, which are primarily found in fatty fish. Vary your diet and consider dietary supplements to ensure you are getting ample amounts of all forms of omega-3s.

MONOUNSATURATED FATS

Monounsaturated fats occur naturally in many foods. The majority are found in plant-based liquid oils, like olive, rapeseed and almond oils, though other sources include avocados and many nuts and seeds. While no specific amount is recommended for monounsaturated fat intake, this healthy fat consumption should fall within the recommended range of fat 20-35% of one's daily energy intake.

MAKE YOUR FATS MORE MEDITERRANEAN

Replacing saturated fats with plant-based or unsaturated fats like monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats may help lower heart disease risk factors, as has been observed in research examining the effects of Mediterranean dietary patterns? Just 30 grams of heart-smart almonds contains 13 grams of unsaturated fat and only 1 gram of saturated fat, providing a convenient and versatile source of good fats. A hallmark of the Mediterranean diet is the consumption of MUFA-rich olive oil. Almonds also contain a high proportion of MUFAs, providing 9 grams per 30 grams serving (or about 50% of their total calories).

NOT ALL FATS ARE EQUAL

Not surprisingly, we cannot judge foods by fat alone. It's important to look at the total nutrient package of foods (and the total diet) to determine their overall healthfulness. Here are three helpful tips:

1. Use mono- and polyunsaturated fats in place of saturated fats. Foods rich in these good fats, like olive and rapeseed oil, may help lower your risk of heart disease.
2. Avoid low-fat versions of foods as they tend to be higher in sugar and sodium than their full-fat counterparts. Replacing saturated fat with refined carbohydrates and added sugars does not lower cardiovascular risk and may raise triglyceride and HDL levels.
3. Aim for an eating pattern that's filled primarily with whole foods that are minimally processed. Choose natural sources of good fats, including nuts, such as almonds, and fish, such as salmon.

Love 'em or leave 'em? Get more good fats in your diet with this handy guide!

LOVE 'EM

Munch on a handful of almonds



LEAVE 'EM

instead of a handful of chips or pretzels

Sauté your veggies in olive oil



instead of butter

Grill up some omega-3-rich salmon



instead of deep-frying chicken

Spread avocado on your sandwich



instead of mayonnaise or salad cream

SATURATED FATS

- MEAT
- FULL- AND REDUCED-FAT DAIRY PRODUCTS, LIKE MILK, CHEESE AND ICE CREAM
- BUTTER
- PALM OIL
- COCONUT OIL

MONO UNSATURATED FATS

- OLIVE OIL
- RAPESEED OIL
- NUTS AND NUT BUTTERS, INCLUDING ALMONDS AND ALMOND BUTTER
- AVOCADOS
- SESAME SEEDS AND OIL

POLY UNSATURATED FATS

- SOYBEANS AND OIL
- NUTS AND NUT BUTTERS, INCLUDING ALMONDS AND ALMOND BUTTER
- SUNFLOWER SEEDS AND OIL
- TOFU



OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS

- FATTY FISH, INCLUDING SALMON, MACKEREL AND TROUT
- RAPESEED OIL
- MICROALGAE
- CHIA SEEDS
- FLAX SEEDS AND OIL

OMEGA-6 FATTY ACIDS

- SUNFLOWER SEEDS AND OIL
- SOYBEANS AND OIL
- SESAME SEEDS AND OIL
- CORN OIL

1. EFSA Journal 2010; 8(3):1461.

2. Estruch R, Ros E, Salas-Salvadó J, et al. Primary prevention of cardiovascular disease with a Mediterranean diet. N Engl J Med. 2013; 368:1279-1290