Dear Alice,

I know it’s necessary to have a certain amount of fat in your diet, but occasionally I hear about "good fat" and "bad fat." What is the difference? Is that the same as saturated/unsaturated? What foods have "good fat"? Can I tell by looking at the nutrition label on a food product which kind of fat I’m eating?

? Curious

Answer

Dear Curious,

The "good fat versus bad fat" you've heard about really refers to a particular type of fat's potential risks to your health. But, there's more to fats than just health risk. Fats are a key component of a healthy, tasty diet and have the ability to:

- Carry flavors
- Impart desirable textures — smooth, creamy, and crispy, to name a few
- Give a sense of fullness and satisfy hunger
- Are needed to absorb and store certain vitamins and plant chemicals
- Can contribute to a person's enjoyment of food
- Are essential building blocks in cell production, maintenance, and repair
- Provide and store energy

What is inherently present in the "good versus bad" discussion, though, is that while there are some similar components, fats aren’t created or behave in the same way. For instance, all fats have the same amount of calories, but they vary in their chemical compositions and effects on health. Saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated are found naturally and some trans fats are chemically-produced (but not all). Some fats, such as the unsaturated variety, are associated with benefits to your health, whereas others, such as the saturated and trans types are often linked to health risks. Read on for more detail about each of these types of fat.

Unsaturated fats can be broken down into two subtypes: Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats:

- **Monounsaturated fat** is found in olive oil, canola oil, peanut oil, and in most nuts and
nut butters. It has been found to improve cholesterol levels [2] which can then reduce cardiovascular disease risk. There is also evidence that monounsaturated fats may benefit the insulin levels and control blood sugar for those with type 2 diabetes. The amount of monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats (see below) is sometimes listed separately on the nutrition facts label, but when it's not, it can be calculated by subtracting the saturated and trans fats from the total fat.

- **Polyunsaturated fats** are separated into two major categories: omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids. These fats may help decrease the risk of coronary heart disease and improve blood cholesterol levels. Omega-3s are used by the body to produce hormone-like substances with anti-inflammatory effects. The sources rich in omega-3s are fatty fish, such as salmon, sardines, mackerel, herring, and rainbow trout, among others. Canola oil, walnuts, and flaxseed also contain some omega-3s. Omega-6 fats are found in oils such as corn, soybean, cottonseed, sunflower, and safflower. These fats are not listed separately on the nutrition facts label.

*Saturated fat* is primarily found in high-fat cuts of meat, poultry with the skin, whole and two percent dairy products, butter, cheese, and tropical oils: coconut, palm, and palm kernel. Only a small amount (less than ten percent of calories) of saturated fat is needed each day, but the typical American diet usually exceeds that amount. Too much saturated fat may cause a person's bad cholesterol (LDL) to rise and may also increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes [3]. You can look for the amount of saturated fats in a serving of food on the nutrition facts label [4], under the heading "Saturated Fat" below the larger heading of "Total Fat."

*Trans fats* are manufactured by chemically altering oils to make it solid at room temperature though some also occur naturally. In the past, trans fats were widely used in foods as a replacement for saturated fats. Then it was discovered that trans fat, in addition to raising LDL cholesterol (as saturated fat does) it also decreases the level of HDL cholesterol. All companies are now required to list the amount of trans fats on the nutrition facts label. However, there's a caveat: products containing half a gram or less of trans fat per serving are permitted to report zero grams of it on the nutrition facts label. What's an informed consumer to do to sniff out the trans fat? Read the ingredients list. If you see the words "partially hydrogenated" or "hydrogenated" in front the word "oil?, the food probably has a small amount of trans fat. While this doesn't mean you need to avoid the food altogether, it does mean you might consider limiting the amount you eat? a little here and there over time can add up to a lot! Trans fats can be found in fried foods, baked goods, prepackaged foods, creamer, and margarine to name a few.

In general, the secret is not to stay to one extreme or another when it comes to fat in your diet. Though it's noted that too much saturated and trans fat may result in negative health consequences; consuming too much fat, no matter the type, can lead to excess weight which is associated with other health concerns. Finding a balance is key. If you find you have a high fat meal, make the next one lower in fat. Or, if you choose a higher fat food, complement it with a lower fat one. Also, you could consider replacing saturated and hydrogenated fats with the unsaturated fats to reap some of their associated health benefits. There's no need to be "all or nothing" when it comes to fat in your diet, so here's to maintaining moderation!

Alice!

Category: Nutrition & Physical Activity [5]
Related questions

- Reduced fat and calorie diets: How low is too low? [8]
- Avocados are fatty? Are they healthy? [9]
- Health benefits of fish oils [10]

Resources

- Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [12]
- Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUMC) [13]

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