

Fats - What I Need to Know



Fat is essential to life. There are many types of fat, and they all affect the body differently. Some are good for health, and some aren't. Foods that contain fat have a mix of different types, but often one type dominates. Because of this we tend to link certain foods to a certain type of fat (e.g., olive oil with monounsaturated fat). We discuss the different types of fat here, including some of the myths that surround them, and which foods can be included as part of a healthy diet.

The most important message about dietary fat is that it isn't all bad for you! In fact, fats in natural products are often good for our health. It is highly processed fats that are bad for us, especially when they are combined with refined carbohydrates and/or sugar.

Two of the most common myths about fat are that it will make us fat, and that it causes heart attacks, strokes, and other serious conditions. Many people are scared to eat fat because of these myths. We explore why they aren't completely true here.

Does fat make you fat?

Although fat does contain more energy (calories) per gram than carbs and protein, it is untrue to say that "fat makes us fat". When fat comes in natural foods that have been minimally processed it is good at helping us feel full, which makes it difficult to eat too much of it. So as long as the fat you eat comes from real foods, it is unlikely to lead to weight gain.

However, when you eat ultra-processed foods that are high in processed fats and refined carbs this **does** lead to weight gain. This isn't just because of the fat though, these foods can cause weight gain in a number of ways. The refined carbs in them cause insulin levels to increase, which makes it more likely any fat will be stored. They are energy dense, so add lots of calories. They don't fill us up for very long, so we eat more than we need; and they are often designed to make us want to eat more of them, so are difficult to eat in small amounts.

Does fat cause heart attacks?

Again, this depends on what types of food you are having. Eating too much ultra-processed, fat-containing foods can lead to weight gain and an increased risk of heart attacks, strokes and other health issues. However, eating minimally processed foods that contain natural fats can in fact reduce the risk of ill health.

One area that often causes particular alarm is whether eating fat will cause cholesterol to increase. Eating more saturated fat may cause this in some people, but it is actually problems with the transporters that carry the cholesterol which increases the risk of heart attacks and other similar conditions, rather than the cholesterol itself.

Eating too much ultra-processed food **will** have a negative effect on these cholesterol transporters, increasing the risk of health problems. However, eating natural, minimally processed fat-containing foods such as extra-virgin olive oil, oily fish, full fat dairy, nuts, seafood and grass-fed meat will usually have a positive effect on cholesterol transporters.



This page provides guidance to help you make informed choices about what foods to include as part of your new way of eating, and about what you should ideally try to avoid.

Unhealthy fats to avoid.

Ultra-processed foods such as chips, crisps, ready meals, cakes and biscuits often combine refined carbohydrates with processed fats (usually highly processed vegetable oils). Having these foods too often can cause high blood fat (triglyceride) levels and lead to weight gain and other health problems. These foods aren't very good at filling us up either, so they are often eaten in large amounts. This makes the problem even worse! The best thing to do is to avoid ultra-processed foods as much as possible.



Fats to eat in moderation.

We need a small amount of **omega-6 polyunsaturated fat** in our diet, but it is best to avoid having too much of it. Oils that contain this type of fat (like sunflower, sesame, corn and soya oils) are often highly processed, and can be damaged when exposed to heat. It is therefore better to get this type of fat from real foods like nuts and seeds.



Despite what many people believe, natural, minimally processed foods which contain **saturated fat** and/or **dietary cholesterol** are not bad for us. Examples of real foods that contain saturated fat and/or dietary cholesterol that can be included as part of a healthy dietary approach include eggs, dairy products, shellfish and meat. Olive oil and oily fish also contain relatively high amounts of saturated fat, and they are considered to be healthy all around the world.

Healthy fats.

Omega-3 polyunsaturated fats are anti-inflammatory, meaning they can help to repair damage in the body. The balance between how much omega-3 fat and omega-6 fat we eat has an important effect on health, but the modern diet has shifted this in an unhealthy way for many people. Having less processed vegetable or seed oils and ultra-processed food, and more foods that contain omega-3 fats, can help to shift this balance back in the right direction. Oily fish are a good source of omega-3 fats, and you can also get some from free range eggs, walnuts, flax seed, chia seed, cod liver oil, and algae oil. You may wish to take omega-3 supplements if you feel that you cannot obtain enough from food.



Monounsaturated fat is the main fat in both olive oil and rapeseed oil. It is also found in peanut oil, nuts, meat, and avocados. This type of fat can have a range of health benefits. If you use olive or rapeseed oils they should ideally be cold pressed (or "extra virgin").

This topic is explored further on X-PERT programmes and in X-PERT Handbooks.
For more information, visit www.xperthealth.org.uk.