

Dietary Fat and Healthy Choices

There is a well established link between poor diet and various diseases, and one of the major contributors is over use of fat and oil. In addition to causing weight gain and obesity, eating too much fat or too much of the wrong type of fat may contribute to other serious health problems, including heart disease.

Overweight children are at higher risk

Overweight children are at risk for type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure— problems more commonly seen in adults. New studies also suggest that children who are overweight or have high cholesterol show early warning signs of heart disease.

Not all fats are created equal

Fat has many important functions and is necessary for growth and development of young children. Dietary fat is needed for brain development and production of hormones. It is necessary for the absorption of the fat-soluble vitamins such as vitamins A, D, E and K, and is also the major storage form of energy in the body.

While fat is an essential part of our healthy diet, too much fat can cause health problems. Since some fats are more harmful than others, in addition to watching your total fat, you must also pay attention to the type of fat you are eating.

Three major types of fats

There are three main types of fats found in food and oils.

1. **Unsaturated fats**, found in plant foods and fish, are seen as neutral or even beneficial. The best of them are:
 - A. **monounsaturated**, found in avocados and olive, peanut, sesame oil, most nuts and canola oils
 - B. **polyunsaturated**, found in most vegetable oils such as corn oil, cottonseed oil, sunflower, etc
 - C. **omega-3 fatty acids**, found in oily fish such as albacore tuna and salmon
2. **Saturated fats**, in which carbon atoms are fully hydrogenated, are found in meat and other animal products, such as butter, lard, cheese, and milk (also in palm and coconut oils). Eating too much saturated fat can raise blood cholesterol levels and increase the risk of heart disease
3. **Trans fats**, come from adding hydrogen to vegetable oil, a process transforming them into a more solid state. They are found in stick margarine and commonly used in cakes, cookies and commercial snack and fried foods. Trans fat consumption has been linked to an increased risk of heart disease and needs to be avoided.

Should your children eat only low- fat, low-cholesterol foods?

Since fat is an essential nutrient and fatty foods are not the lone culprit behind the obesity epidemic, it should not be severely restricted.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, if your child is younger than 2 years and overweight or has a family history of high cholesterol or heart disease, reduced fat dietary choices may be appropriate. Always check with your child's health care provider or registered dietitian before restricting fat in your child's diet.

For children between the ages of 2 and 5, provide foods with less saturated fat, trans fat and total fat. By age 5 their food choices, like yours, should include heart-healthy food like low-fat dairy products, skinless chicken, fish, lean red meats, whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

by **A. Rahman Zamani, MD, MPH**

References and Resources

Cholesterol: Should you worry about your child's levels? Fact Sheets for Families, online at

www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org

Overweight and Obesity. Fact Sheets for Families, online at www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) at www.aap.org



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