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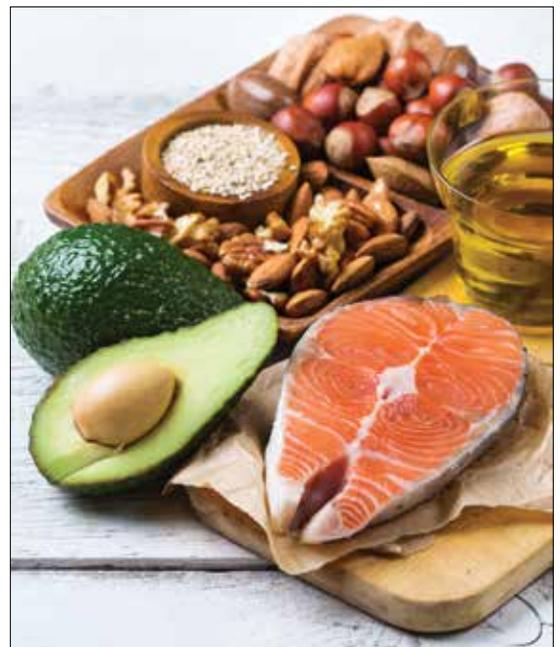
Fats: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

By Gabriela Pacheco, RDN, LD, SNS

» Fat is not an “F word” you should fear in your home kitchens or school cafeterias.

The word *fat* has become a uniformly “bad” word in our food culture today. This is frustrating to me, because, as a registered dietitian and a school nutrition professional, I don’t like labeling *any* food as “good” or “bad,” especially since not all fats are the same. They don’t all perform the same jobs. While various fats in foods have different effects on health, some fats offer health-protective benefits. Our misconceptions about this basic nutrient are sabotaging our ability to eat well and feel our best.

How many times have you asked someone if they’d like some avocado and they reply, “Oh no, it’s got too much fat!”? I’ve heard this response far too many times. Even though I want to dive into a conversation about the benefits of the monounsaturated fat in avocados...I don’t. Not everyone appreciates a teaching moment while they are dining. But this magazine is designed to be an educational resource, so I *am* going to dive into the deep end on this topic, so you can make the choice to enjoy that avocado the next time someone asks! Deciphering what type of fat and in what quantities is not an easy task, but there are ways we can unravel the confusion and separate “*fat*” from fiction.



THE FAT BASICS

Fat is incredibly important within the human body. Dietary fat, which is found in oils, coconut, nuts, milk, cheese, meat, poultry and fish, provides structure to cells and cushions membranes in order to help prevent damage. Fats are also essential for absorbing fat-soluble vitamins, including vitamin A, which is important for maintaining healthy eyes and lungs. Fat also takes longer to digest, meaning it’s satiating and keeps us feeling fuller for longer.

However, fats are not just nutrient heavyweights working in the body; they also serve many functions within the foods we eat. Fats affect the nutrition, appearance, flavor and

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melting points of various foods. Fats also create emulsions, which can be essential to the satisfying “mouth feel” of products like salad dressings, mayonnaise and ice cream, as well as serve as an efficient mode of heat transfer while cooking.



you eat, even though cholesterol is not technically classified as a dietary fat. Only animal-based foods (such as meat, cheese and egg yolks) contain cholesterol. While cholesterol is found in every cell of body and serves a useful purpose, if you have too much cholesterol in your blood, it can combine with

THE FAB FIVE

There are five major dietary fats: *saturated fats*, *trans fats*, *monounsaturated fats*, *polyunsaturated fats* and *cholesterol*. Each has its own unique chemical structure and physical properties. For example, saturated and trans fats tend to be more solid at room temperature (think butter or coconut oil) while monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats tend to stay as liquids (vegetable oils). The healthiest fats include monounsaturated and polyunsaturated (more on these later).

All fats have the same number of calories, and they are more calorie-dense (providing nine calories per gram) than carbs or protein (which provide four calories per gram). Health experts generally recommend replacing dietary items containing saturated fats and trans fats with those that have monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, while still maintaining a nutritionally-adequate diet. Keep in mind that your own body makes its own fat from taking in *excess calories*, not just calories from fat. Too many calories from any source can end up as stored fat.

Trans fats are the worst type of fat for the heart and blood vessels, because they can raise bad LDL and lower good HDL cholesterol levels. They've also been linked to inflammation in the body, which can increase risks of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and other chronic conditions. Partially hydrogenated oil is a common source of trans fats. This type of oil has been commonly used by food manufacturers in the production of such items as margarine, peanut butter, baked goods

and processed snack products, although the industry has worked to eliminate or reduce this ingredient in recent years. Trans fats are also naturally found in beef fat and dairy fat, albeit in small amounts.

Saturated fats are primarily found in animal products, including dairy, although they are seen in certain plant foods, as well, such as coconut and palm products, plus some nuts. A diet rich in saturated fats can raise bad cholesterol levels and some recent reports note a link between consumption of saturated fats and heart disease.

People are often terrified of saturated fat, but when it is obtained from healthy sources, in moderation, like grass-fed butter and coconut oil, it provides the body much-needed fuel. The reason coconut oil has a bad rap is because like butter and lard, coconut oil is solid at room temperature with a long shelf life and the ability to withstand high cooking temperatures. But there may be a saving grace—coconut oil's saturated fat is made up mostly of medium-chain triglycerides or MCTs, which your body handles differently than the longer-chain fats in liquid vegetable oils, dairy, and fatty meats.

As for grass-fed butter, its nutrition is notably higher in many nutrients than butter from cows that are fed grain-based diets. Studies have shown that the milk from grass-fed cows is significantly richer in fatty acids and fat-soluble vitamins.

Your body (primarily the liver) makes 75% of the *cholesterol* in your body. The rest comes from the foods

other substances to form plaque, which sticks to, and builds up on, the walls of your arteries.

If you're eating a diet high in animal-based foods, it's safe to assume that you're at risk for the negative effects of both saturated fat and cholesterol. A growing body of research suggests that when it comes to dietary fat, you should focus on eating healthy fats and avoid unhealthy fats as much as possible. But I can't stress enough that just because something is supposed to be good for you, or better than other alternatives, how much you eat makes a difference in caloric intake.

POLY & MONO

The two fats best for health are *polyunsaturated* and *monounsaturated*. These aren't just “less bad” than other types of fats—when consumed in moderation, as a part of a healthy diet, these fats offer a variety of health benefits.

When it comes to *polyunsaturated fats*, look for:

Omega-3 Fats—Omega-3 fatty acids are a type of polyunsaturated fats that are found in both plant and animal foods. They can slightly lower blood pressure, slow the buildup of plaque in the arteries and reduce the risk of developing an irregular heartbeat.

Omega-6 Fats—Omega-6 fatty acids appear in high concentrations in a number of “popular” foods, such as vegetable oil, dairy, eggs, chicken, pork, beef, some fast food items and many baked goods. These polyunsaturated fats are often used to help lower

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the risk of heart disease by decreasing “bad” cholesterol and increasing “good” cholesterol. Because of society’s dependence on highly processed foods, however, most people actually eat too many omega-6 fats, which can increase inflammation within the body, with its own set of risks.

Other foods rich in polyunsaturated fats include fish like salmon or tuna, walnuts, canola and other plant oils, ground flaxseed and eggs from chickens fed a diet high in omega-3s.

Monounsaturated fats can improve blood cholesterol levels, which can decrease your risk of heart disease. These can also improve the function of your blood vessels. Foods to eat include nuts, olive oil, avocado and natural peanut butter.

Everyone’s dietary needs are different, based on many factors. And it is simply not enough to add foods rich in unsaturated fats into a diet overflowing with unhealthy foods and fats. Making healthful swaps—baked potatoes for French fries or avocado for creamy dressings—will help you add more healthy fats into your diet.

FAT IN SCHOOL MEALS

Nutrition standards for school meals are expected to follow the lead of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, recommendations issued every five years by the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services. These guidelines are based on current nutrition science and advise consumers to ingest more whole grains, fruits and vegetables, moderate amounts of protein and carbohydrates and small amounts of sugar and fat. The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 led to the first update in 15 years to the nutrition standards for school meals, reflecting the recommendations of the *Dietary Guidelines*.

The challenge for school nutrition professionals, at least in the beginning of the transition, was meeting the nutritional requirements, while appealing

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1. Fat-soluble vitamin A is important for _____.

- liver cleanses
 reducing joint pain
 healthy eyes and lungs
 digestive health

2. Fats usually digest quickly in the body.

- True
 False

3. Saturated fats tend to be more _____ at room temperature.

- solid
 runny
 pungent in flavor
 bitter

4. Fats provide _____ calories per gram.

- four
 seven
 eight
 nine

5. Saturated fats are found in foods like butter, nuts, dairy or coconut.

- True
 False

6. Trans fats have been linked to inflammation in the body, which can increase the risks of _____.

- heart disease
 stroke
 diabetes
 all of the above

7. Cholesterol is not technically classified as a dietary fat.

- True
 False

8. The two best fats for health are:

- Supersaturated and hypersaturated
 Hyposaturated and hypersaturated
 Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated
 Trans fats and cholesterol

9. Nutrition standards for school meals are expected to follow the philosophies in “Eat Pray Love.”

- True
 False

10. Children need adequate calories and nutrients to maintain their rapid growth.

- True
 False

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to student taste preferences, which was, and is, no small task. The foods children eat outside of school are not bound by any such restrictions. Manufacturers have stepped up to the plate to reformulate K-12 products—some, like pizza, are different than the same products that company offers commercially. This can present a PR

challenge for school nutrition operators to help outside stakeholders realize that a school pizza does, in fact, meet a higher standard.

Beyond that, school nutrition operators need to help parents and others without a nutrition background to realize that fats are important for growing children. After the first year

of life, adolescence is the second-most critical period of physical growth in the human life cycle. All school-aged children need adequate calories and other nutrients to address their rapid growth and increased physical activity. If they eat foods that are lacking in nutritional value, or do not eat enough, their growth will be affected adversely. Or, if they eat foods that are high in calories but lack nutritional density, then they can become overweight or obese, while at the same time suffering from malnutrition. We all know that a healthy diet for school-aged children should be based on as wide a variety of foods as possible, with an emphasis on foods of high-nutrient density.

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FAT DEFENDER

Knowledge—how to decipher the good, the bad and the ugly when it comes to dietary fats—is a powerful tool for creating and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Aim to eat a dietary pattern that emphasizes intake of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains; this includes low-fat dairy products, poultry, fish, legumes, non-tropical vegetable oils and nuts; and limit your intake of sodium, processed sweets, sugar sweetened beverages and red meats. Doing so means that your diet will be low in both saturated fats *and* trans fats. So, please pass me the avocado! **SN**

Disclaimer: *There are several medical conditions that require either a very low-fat or a higher-fat diet to maintain health. Be aware of all your special-dietary-needs children in school to ensure their needs are appropriately addressed.*

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Fats: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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