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
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.

**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 benefits, which 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-3 Fats**—Omega-3 fatty acids are a type of polyunsaturated fats that are primarily found in fatty fish, such as salmon, mackerel and sardines. They can help lower triglyceride levels and reduce the risk of heart disease.

**Omega-6 Fats**—Omega-6 fatty acids are found in many processed foods, such as corn, soybean and sunflower oils. They can help reduce inflammation in the body and lower blood pressure.

**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
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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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.

**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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