

Nutrition module

16-week curriculum

FOCUS ON FAT

Do You Know the Four Basic “Rules” of Healthy Fat Living?

1. A low-fat diet is a healthy diet.
2. When preparing food, use the kind of oil that reduces cholesterol in the blood.
3. Only 20-35% of your calories should come from fat.
4. Certain fats are healthier than others.

While we are generally advised to eat a fairly low-fat diet, the emphasis is on eating the *right* healthy fats.

So how do we put these rules into practice? Review this module to understand the role fat plays in your diet, what kind of fat to eat and how to minimize the amount of fat in your diet.

The Role of Fat in the Body

Although fat often gets a bad rap, it does play an important role in the body and is a necessary component of a healthy diet. Fat maintains healthy skin, insulates the body against changes in temperature, and acts as a cushion to protect and hold vital organs in place. Another important function of fat is to carry fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K throughout the body.

When you follow a nutritionally sound weight reducing plan (i.e. you consume less calories than your body requires), your fat cells will release body fat to use as fuel. (You might be surprised to learn that the body stores almost all the extra calories you eat as fat, whether you consumed fat, carbohydrate, protein or alcohol.) A sound weight management plan taps into your fat stores for energy and preserves body protein for the growth and repair of muscles and other tissues.

Fat in the Diet

As the most concentrated source of energy in the diet, fat provides nine calories per gram, compared to four calories per gram from carbohydrate and protein. In essence, fat packs in more calories per gram than other nutrients, which is why you need to look at both the fat content and “calorie load” of the food you eat.

You’ve probably heard of the three types of fat (listed below), which are classified based on their chemical structure. But which fat is the healthy choice, and how can fat affect your long-term health? To get a clearer picture, take a look at how each fat affects the body:

Saturated fats and trans fats

Raise blood cholesterol levels, encourage the formation of plaque (deposits in the arteries and veins that block blood flow) and promote heart disease. **(BAD CHOICE)**

Polyunsaturated fats

Help lower total cholesterol, but have been shown to alter the balance between HDL (good) cholesterol and LDL (bad) cholesterol. **(BETTER CHOICE)**

Monounsaturated fats

Help lower LDL (bad) cholesterol without lowering HDL (good) cholesterol. **(BEST CHOICE)**

Keep in mind that the total amount of fat and cholesterol in your diet and the type of fat you consume influence your risk of heart disease and several types of cancer.

The Cholesterol Connection

Believe it or not, your body actually needs cholesterol, which serves as one of the building components of body cells and certain hormones. Cholesterol also helps produce bile acids, which help digest fat. To perform these functions, your body makes most of its needed cholesterol from dietary fats, but it also obtains cholesterol directly from the foods you eat.

As with fat, too much dietary cholesterol is unhealthy. If blood cholesterol levels are too high, the body might deposit cholesterol on artery walls and form plaque. Here's how: Lipoproteins such as low-density lipoprotein (LDL) and high-density lipoprotein (HDL) taxi cholesterol around the body. If the cells don't need more cholesterol, LDL remains in circulation, where it accumulates on existing plaque deposits to narrow the arteries. Hence, LDL has been named "bad cholesterol." (HDL, known as "good cholesterol," helps transport the cholesterol away from your arteries and veins where plaque forms.) As plaque builds up, it narrows the space in the arteries and limits or blocks blood flow to the heart. A heart deprived of blood works harder and is prone to disease.

Several factors affect your blood cholesterol level—the food you eat, the cholesterol your body produces and your genetic makeup. Most people can control their blood cholesterol levels by following a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol.

Here's What You Can Do To Minimize Your Risk of Developing Heart Disease:

- Maintain a healthy blood cholesterol level.
- Get your cholesterol level checked yearly if your cholesterol is high, or every five years if your cholesterol is at a normal level.
- Increase your level of HDL cholesterol and decrease your level of LDL cholesterol.

Here's How You Can Do It:

- Reduce total dietary fat intake to 20-35% or less of total calories.
- Reduce saturated fat intake to less than 10% of calories.
- Limit trans fats to as little as possible.
- Reduce cholesterol intake.
- Choose mostly monounsaturated fats and then polyunsaturated fats. Avoid saturated and trans fats.
- Exercise regularly.

Watch Out for "Invisible" Fat Calories

You can reduce the amount of fat in your diet in a variety of ways. Measure (and minimize) the amount of butter, cream, margarine or dressings you add to food. Even better, flavor food with herbs and spices instead. Steam, bake, broil or grill your foods. Choose lean cuts of meat, and trim the fat before and/or after cooking.

Food manufacturers now produce many fat-free and low-fat versions of foods that will also help you reduce your total fat intake. But don't fool yourself—nonfat and low-fat foods still contain calories, so you need to exercise portion control when eating these items.