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Good Fats, Bad Fats

Most of us were taught that a good diet is low in fat because a high fat diet may lead to obesity, heart disease and other illnesses.

Unfortunately, this advice may not have been completely correct.

A study of diets in seven countries, conducted in the 1940s and 1950s, seemed to have discovered a relationship between dietary fat content, blood cholesterol, and the occurrence of heart disease.

Americans were therefore advised to reduce their total dietary fat intake and especially their intake of cholesterol.

Grocery shelves became filled with low cholesterol, reduced-fat, and fat-free “heart healthy” products. Animal fats (which contain cholesterol) were replaced by vegetable fats (which do not contain cholesterol) - for example, McDonald's were convinced to cook french fries in vegetable oil rather than beef tallow. Eggs, once considered an ideal food because of their rich protein content, became “unhealthy” because of their cholesterol content.

Today Americans eat 15% less fat. Yet obesity, high blood pressure and heart disease are still on the rise. Why?

All fats are not equal, dietary cholesterol does not determine blood levels of cholesterol, and fat substitutes are not necessarily less fattening.

All fats are not equal. Dietary fat is made of four types of triglycerides: saturated, polyunsaturated, monounsaturated and trans fats.

Saturated fats are found in meat, dairy products and a few vegetable oils such as palm and coconut. They are solid at room temperature.

Polyunsaturated fats are found in plant oils such as corn and soybean, whole grains, seeds and fatty fish such as salmon and tuna. They are liquid at room temperature. Depending on chemical structure, they are called omega-3 or omega-6.

Monounsaturated fats are liquid oils at room temperature, for example canola, olive and peanut oil. They are also present in nuts and avocados.

Trans fats are man-made products such as vegetable shortening and margarine that are solid at room temperature. Convenient to use and low in cholesterol, trans fats replaced saturated animal fats in many products.

Fats: good, bad and ugly. Saturated fats are associated with high blood cholesterol levels, especially LDL (“bad”) cholesterol levels, and with increased risks for heart disease.

Trans fats are even worse than saturated fats. They raise LDL cholesterol, lower HDL (“good”) cholesterol and raise the risk for heart disease even more than saturated fats. Unfortunately, they are what replaced animal fats in commercial baked goods, margarine, fast-food french fries, etc. Avoid any product containing “partially hydrogenated” oil or “vegetable shortening.”

In contrast, diets high in poly- and monounsaturated fats will reduce blood

cholesterol levels, reduce LDL levels, raise HDL levels and reduce the risk for heart disease.

Eggs turn out to be low in saturated fat and high in other nutrients - especially folic acid - and may not increase the risk of heart disease after all.

Interestingly, a second look at the original research of dietary fat in seven countries reveals that in one country, the incidence of heart disease was actually low despite a high total fat intake! This diet was high in mono- and polyunsaturated fats and low in saturated fats, but the significance of this distinction was not recognized at the time.

Fat substitutes. Fat-free products often have carbohydrate added in order to give the food its normal consistency. Unfortunately, the added carbohydrate can be as fattening, if not moreso, than the original fat-containing version of the product.

Fat? Carbohydrate? Studies have shown that diets high in saturated fat and diets high in carbohydrate are both associated with increased risks of heart disease and possibly cancer. In contrast, diets high in unsaturated fats are associated with lower risks of heart disease and possibly cancer.

Recommendations. Rather than reducing all fats in the diet, replace saturated fats with mono- and polyunsaturated fats. Avoid trans fats completely. Avoid fat-free products in which the fat content has been replaced with carbohydrates.