

good fats bad fats

How to choose well



For years, fat has had the reputation of being bad for your health. Increasingly, however, research has shown that not all fats are equal. Some oils and fatty foods contain nutrients called essential fatty acids, which our bodies need for good health. Let's look at how to know the difference between good fats and bad fats.

The most important fatty acids for good health are omega-3 and omega-6. We need both to remain healthy. But we eat way too much omega-6, which can raise blood pressure, lead to blood clots, raise risk of heart attack and stroke, and cause the body to retain water. Omega-6 is in corn oil and vegetable oils used in so much American food. But we don't eat nearly enough omega-3, which can reduce risk of heart disease and cancer. Omega-3 is in fish, fish oil, green leafy vegetables, flax seed, and walnuts.

How much fat do we need? Most experts recommend that 20%-30% of our calories come from fat. Most of us consume way more - about 40% of our calories from fats in meat, butter, cheese, baked goods, etc. So the bottom line is that we get too much fat in general, but not enough of the healthy fat.

So how can you get enough of the healthy fats? Start by avoiding the truly unhealthy fats - trans-fats. They're used in most margarines, packaged cookies, chips, crackers and other baked goods sold in supermarkets. Look on the nutrition label. They'll appear on the ingredients list as "partially hydrogenated" oils. They are also used in many restaurants for frying foods (like french fries).

Enjoy nuts as health-boosting snacks. All varieties of nuts offer healthy fats. Peanuts, almonds, walnuts, and pecans, have been shown to have heart healthy benefits, including lowering "bad" LDL cholesterol. Walnuts are a source of omega-3. But remember that all nuts are high in calories. Think of them as excellent substitutes for junk food and watch your portion sizes.

Go for the fish. Studies show that people who eat omega-3 rich fish at least twice a week have less heart disease, a reduced risk of cancer, and improvements in mental health. But fish absorb the contaminant mercury from the environment. So experts recommend eating no more than 2 servings per week of fish like shark, swordfish, and king mackerel (which contain the higher mercury levels). Small salmon species give the least exposure to mercury. Since mercury is stored in the flesh, high-quality fish oil supplements don't carry the mercury risk and are a convenient way to get omega-3 daily.

Stick to healthy oils - olive oil or canola oil. Olive oil is loaded with monounsaturated fatty acids, and it is known to support a healthy vascular system. The fatty acids in canola oil have been shown to reduce blood cholesterol levels, and may lower "bad," LDL cholesterol levels. Avoid regular vegetable oil, corn oil, safflower oil, soybean oil, and cottonseed oil. These are high in omega-6.

Butter is a saturated fat. Use it sparingly or do what the Italians do - put olive oil on bread. Make butter healthier by blending equal parts of butter and olive or canola oil. It's a softer spread and dilutes the cholesterol with monounsaturated fats. Eliminate traditional margarine - it's a trans-fat disaster.