

Fats - Getting the balance right

Fats form an important part of our diet; they provide the body with energy and with some important vitamins (for example, vitamins A & D). They also contain essential fats which the body is unable to make for itself, however, eating too much fat can be unhealthy.

Getting the balance right....

Compared to other nutrients in our diet, like protein and carbohydrate, dietary fats/oils are very high in calories, giving 9 calories for every gram eaten (so, for example, 1 tablespoon of oil gives us 135 calories). It is therefore important for our health and for our waistlines that we watch the amount of fat and fatty foods we eat. By reducing the unhealthy saturated fats and replacing some of them with the healthier unsaturated fats and oils, we will be getting a better balance for our heart health.

So how much and which sort of fats should we be eating for our health?

How much?

We all need some fat in our diet but eating too much makes us more likely to become overweight. This increases our likelihood of developing more serious health problems like type 2 diabetes, joint problems, and some cancers. In recent years we have been encouraged to reduce our total fat intake. We can use food labelling to help us to do this. Some food labels now give us 'Guideline Daily Amounts' (GDAs) for fats and calories, needed by average adults of normal weight and average activity levels, are shown in this table:

Guideline Daily Amounts

Each Day	Women	Men
Calories	2000	2500
Fat	70g	95g

The table is a guide only and intake will vary from day to day. It shows that approximately 1/3 of our total daily calories would be provided from our fat intake (if we consider that each gram of fat gives us 9 calories).

It is these figures for women that are used to calculate the values for the "Guideline Daily Amount" front of pack food labels.

The nutrition panel on the back or side of food packs can be used to tell us the amount of fat in 100g of a food (the percentage) and the label below shows how this can be used to decide whether a food contains a 'a lot' or 'a little' of fat (and saturated fat) in 100g.



Nutrient	High	Low
Fat	20g/100g	less than <3g/100g
Saturated Fat	5g/100g	less than <1.5g/100g

This is the basis of the front of pack "Multiple Traffic Light" system of food labelling, where foods with over 20% fat would have a red flash for fat, those between 3 and 20% would be amber and those with under 3% would be green. Take for example a pie with 650 calories and 35g fat, this would make a large contribution towards our daily amounts, compared to say an apple at 50 calories and just a trace of fat.

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Which type?

Some fats are far better for our health than others. There are three main types of fat – saturated, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated and most foods contain a mixture of these three fats. Food labels often give the type of fat present in the food, as well as the amount. The nutrition panel will tell you how much of the total fat comes from the saturated type of fat, and some labels like the extract below will also give you the amount of mono- and polyunsaturated fat present.

Nutrition Information

	Typical Values	
	Per 100g	Per serving (16g)
Fat	22.6g	3.6g
of which saturates	9.8g	1.6g
polyunsaturates	8.2g	1.3g
monounsaturates	4.6g	0.7g



So, which fat should we choose and which to avoid?

Fats which are considered to be less healthy because they can raise our blood cholesterol levels and increase our risk of heart disease.

✗ Saturated Fats -

These include harder fats like lard, butter, fats on meat and are found in fatty meat products, pastries, cakes, biscuits, in full fat dairy foods, and take-away meals. No more than one third of our total fat intake should come from saturated fat in the diet; for men this would be 30g/day and for women, 20g/day.

✗ Trans Fats (Hydrogenated Vegetable Oils) –

These are vegetable oils which have been processed to make them hard; this also makes them less healthy, like saturated fats. We should be cutting down on these fats too. They are found in processed foods, like cakes pastries, and biscuits. They may appear on the list of ingredients.

Ingredients: wheat flour, partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, sugar, malt extract, glucose

More information about trans fats can be found in the BDA Food Fact Sheet entitled 'Trans Fats'.

Fats which are considered to be better for our health, are the unsaturated fats/oils and the special omega 3 fats. These healthier fats can help to lower blood cholesterol. Try replacing some of the less healthy fats with these...



✓ Unsaturated Fats/oils -

These fats are found generally in plant foods such as seeds/grains, nuts, vegetables and fruit. They can be either polyunsaturated (PUFA), found in sunflower, soya, corn, and sesame oils or monounsaturated (MUFA) like olive and rapeseed oils. They should provide around one third of our fat intake. Recent evidence suggests that the inclusion of the MUFA type of fats is particularly beneficial, as these help to promote the healthier type of cholesterol in our blood. Practical ways of including these would be by using small amounts of these oils to cook with (instead of lard or butter), their use in salad dressings, or as spreading fats. Almonds, hazelnuts and peanuts are rich sources of MUFA fats and if eaten unsalted, just a small daily handful would contribute towards a healthy diet.

✓ Omega 3 Fats –

These are a group of unsaturated fats called 'essential' fatty acids as they can not be made in the body in sufficient amounts. Oily fish such as pilchards, mackerel, salmon and sardines are excellent sources; in much smaller amounts plant foods can also provide these, eg, rapeseed, soya, flax, linseed oils, and walnuts; for more information on non-fish sources of these fats, visit www.vegsoc.org and look for 'Fats, omegas & cholesterol' in the food & nutrition section. These important fats can help prevent the blood from clotting, help regulate the heart rhythm and are particularly important to improve survival after a heart attack. We really need to increase our intake of these fats - there is growing evidence that they offer many other health benefits too. You can view the BDA Food Fact Sheet entitled 'Functional Foods-Omega 3 fatty acids' on the BDA website for more information.

For more information on a healthy diet, fats, food labelling, and losing weight visit the following websites: www.nhs.uk/livewell or www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts



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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts
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