

# What Do You Know About Fat?<sup>1</sup>

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We hear a lot about fat—in the news, from friends, and in the books and magazines we read. For help sorting out all the information about fat, read on!

## What is fat?

Fat is part of a healthful diet. It is a nutrient that provides energy, or calories. However, the type of fat makes a difference to heart health. The two main types of fat found in food are called saturated and unsaturated.

- **Saturated fats** are usually solid at room temperature and are found primarily in foods that come from animal products. Examples include beef fat, cream, chicken fat, cheeses made with whole and 2% milk, butter, and lard. A few foods from plants are also high in saturated fats. They include some oils such as coconut, palm, and palm kernel.
- **Unsaturated fats** are liquid at room temperature and are found in plants products. They are classified as monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Examples include vegetable oils such as olive, canola, corn, and soybean. There are also some fish such as salmon, trout, and herring that contain a type of highly unsaturated fat called omega-3. This fat can help improve heart health.

## What is *trans* fat?

*Trans* fat is a type of fat formed when liquid oils are turned into solid fats. This process is called **hydrogenation**, which



Figure 1. Preparing baked salmon with an olive oil vinaigrette with lemon and chives

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increases the shelf-life of foods. *Trans* fat can be found in margarine, snack foods, and baked goods such as cakes, pies, and cookies. *Trans* fat also occurs naturally in some foods. Animal-based products like meat and dairy products contain small amounts of *trans* fats.

1. La versión en español de este documento es *¿Qué sabe sobre la grasa?* (FCS8688-Span). This document is FCS8688, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First published June 2001. Revised September 2011. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/>.
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## What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fat-like substance found in all human and animal cells. The body needs cholesterol to make certain hormones and digest fats. It is not necessary to eat foods containing cholesterol because the human body is able to make cholesterol after the age of two. However, the majority of people get cholesterol from the foods they eat. Remember, cholesterol is found only in foods that come from animals. The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGA) recommends we eat less than 300 mg of cholesterol per day.

*For good health, it's important to limit the saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol we eat. They increase LDL (low-density lipoprotein) or "unhealthy" cholesterol levels in our blood, increasing the risk of heart disease.*

## Why do we need fat?

Fat is a nutrient that we need for good health. It helps the body:

- Protect internal organs from injury
- Provide insulation
- Provide energy
- Absorb other nutrients such as vitamins A, D, E, and K

Unfortunately, most Americans eat too much fat. Eating too many high-fat foods can lead to weight gain and even obesity. Obesity increases the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

## How much fat do we need?

The amount of fat we need depends on our energy (calorie) needs. The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGA) recommends that 20–35 percent of our energy intake should be from fat. Table 1 shows the recommended grams of fat intake at various caloric levels per day.

## What about children?

Children under the age of two should not follow a low-fat diet. They need fat and cholesterol for growth and brain

development. However, after age two, children can gradually move toward a lower-fat eating pattern.

## Trimming the Fat

Here are some tips to reduce the amount of total fats as well as saturated, *trans* fats, and cholesterol in your diet.

### When shopping

- Choose foods lower in saturated fat, *trans* fat, and cholesterol. Follow this quick guideline:
  - For saturated fat and cholesterol, 5% Daily Value (DV) or less is low, and 20% DV or more is high.
  - *Trans* fats, do not have a DV, so try to choose foods that contain a low amount by reading the ingredient list.
- Select lean meats by looking for the words “round” or “loin” in the name for lean beef and “loin” or “leg” for pork or lamb.
- Buy fat-free or low-fat dairy products.
- Try cooking oils that contain unsaturated fats such as canola, olive, soybean, corn, and sunflower oils.
- Choose soft margarines; the mixture of saturated and *trans* fats in these foods is lower than the amount in hard margarines and animal fats.

**Did you know...?** The food label can show “0 grams of trans fat” if a serving size contains less than 0.5 grams.

### When cooking

- Remove the skin from poultry.
- Cut visible fat from meat.
- Bake, broil, grill, or steam your foods instead of frying or breading them.

### When eating

- Enjoy more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and beans.

Table 1. These guidelines apply to total fat intake per day, not each food or each meal. For example, a high-fat breakfast can be balanced out with a low-fat lunch and dinner.

Calories needed per day	Recommended fat intake (grams)
1,600	35–62
2,200	49–86
2,800	62–109

- Add omega-3 rich fish like trout, herring, and salmon to menus.
- Substitute food high in saturated fat with foods high in unsaturated fats.
- Limit butter and cream based sauces on meat, pasta, and vegetables.
- Avoid processed meats such as sausage and salami. Even “reduced-fat” varieties are high in calories, saturated fat, and cholesterol.
- Limit baked goods and fried foods.
- Go easy on salad dressings, mayonnaise, lard, butter, and margarines. Use herbs and spices instead.

**Tip:** Don't try to make a lot of changes at once! It's easier to make small steps over time that lead to a healthy eating pattern.

## References

American Dietetic Association / Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics <http://www.eatright.org>

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