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# The SKINNY On FATS

We should avoid eating fat, right? Well, like many things, the answer is more complicated than it seems. Interestingly, the relationship between dietary fat intake and the development of heart disease is not well established, despite mountains of research dedicated to the topic. Recent thought has focused more on the type of fat ingested, rather than the total fat.

## DOES DIETARY FAT CAUSE HEART DISEASE?

Surprisingly, there is not much evidence to support the idea that increased total fat intake causes heart disease. For example, populations with a higher total fat intake do not always have more heart disease. One study of seven countries found the lowest incidence of heart disease in two countries: Japan and Crete. The Japanese had a very low fat intake. The people of Crete, on the other hand, had a very high fat intake -- but mostly consisting of "good fats" - monounsaturated fats from vegetable sources (i.e. olive oil).

Studies of individuals in the USA have also yielded similar results. Of 80,000 women in the Nurse's Health Study, the 20 percent who ate the most fat did not have more coronary disease than the 20 percent who ate the least fat.

## BUT ISN'T A LOW-FAT DIET HELPFUL?

From a scientific standpoint, there is little evidence that reducing total dietary fat leads to less heart disease. One study randomly assigned 48,000 women to either a series of intensive group sessions aimed at reducing fat intake, or simpler dietary education materials without personalized guidance. The intensive reduction group did achieve substantially lower fat intake, but this change did not significantly impact their incidence of heart disease. This could be because intake of all fats were

reduced, both harmful (saturated and trans fat) and beneficial (mono- and poly-unsaturated fat)

## CAN A LOW FAT DIET BE HARMFUL?

The main problem with the "low-fat diet" is peoples' tendency to replace foods with potentially harmful fats with other types of foods that are not necessarily beneficial. Instead of replacing high fat foods with naturally low-fat foods (fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains), people often turn to "fat-free" packaged snack foods that are loaded with carbohydrates. This then becomes a "high-simple-carb" diet that can dramatically backfire, leading to obesity, reduction in the "good" cholesterol (HDL), and increased chance of developing diabetes.

## GOOD FATS, BAD FATS

**Trans fats:** These come mostly from an industrial process that changes natural polyunsaturated fats into trans fats. Generally speaking, most trans fats are though to be quite harmful to the heart, and several cities have restricted trans fats from foods served in restaurants. Indeed, you'll find these fats in fast food and fried food, but you may not realize that they might also lurk in your home: Margarines, packaged foods, soup cups, frozen dinners, chips and crackers, baked treats, cookies, candy, and even breakfast cereals can have significant amounts of trans fat. One clue is to look for labels that contain the words "partially hydrogenated," meaning the fats have been converted to a "trans" form that helps keep pastries firm and margarine stiff at room temperature.

**Saturated fats:** These come mostly from animal products. We know that saturated fat intake raises the total serum cholesterol and the incidence of coronary heart disease. This is particularly true for those saturated fats in dairy products and red meats. Reducing

dietary intake of these foods can reduce the total cholesterol as well as the "bad" cholesterol, LDL.

**Monounsaturated fats:** Popular sources of these friendly fats include olive oil and canola oil. Replacing saturated fats with monounsaturated ones can certainly help improve cholesterol profiles and may help decrease the tendency of the blood to form a thrombus, or blood clot, which can instigate a heart attack. These fats are a staple of the "Mediterranean diet" which is associated with very low rates of coronary disease.

**Polyunsaturated fats:** These include Omega-3's and are found in nuts, seeds, fish, algae, leafy greens, flaxseed, and krill. Eskimos with a high intake of these fats have very low rates of heart disease, and decreased heart disease has been seen in studies of American populations as well.

## BOTTOM LINE

Total fat intake is not important. Instead, replace the bad fats in your diet with good fats. How? Avoid stick margarine, commercially available baked goods, and deep-fried fast foods. Focus on fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grain products. Cook with canola or olive oil, and enjoy a moderate amount of nuts and seeds. And as a rule of thumb, eat *foods* that grow from the Earth rather than *foodstuffs* made in a factory.

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