

# Healthy Fats- Topic of the Month

M A Y 3, 2023

Fats have gotten a bad rap over the years when it comes to dietary advice. Many people remember the hype of the low-fat diets and then the shift to high-fat diets; this back and forth creates much confusion about what fats we should eat. When we start to talk about including “healthy fats” into our daily diet, it is important to know what those fats are and how they benefit our health.

## Why do we need fats?

Fats are a very important part of a healthy diet. Fats are one of the macronutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, and fats) that support our body and its many functions. Some roles of fat include being a structural component to cell membranes and catalyst to absorbing valuable nutrients, providing energy, balancing hormonal health, and lowering inflammation.

## Fat Breakdown

Fats are a part of a larger group of nutrients called lipids. Triglycerides are the most common form of fat in the diet. Fatty acids are the building blocks of fats. The structure of a fatty acid is a chain of carbons with hydrogen on each end. The structure of the fatty acid determines if it will be solid or liquid at room temperature. Let’s look at the different kinds of fats below.

- **Unsaturated Fatty Acids:** Fats with a double chemical bond that the body may use to store and utilize energy more efficiently. These fats are liquid at room temperature. Widely considered the “heart-healthy” fat, the length and number of bonds affect their use in the body.
  - **Monounsaturated-** One double bond. Commonly found in olive and canola oils; other sources include avocado, almonds, walnuts, pecans, hazelnuts, cashews, and peanuts.
  - **Polyunsaturated-** Two to six double bonds. Primarily found in vegetable and seed oils.
    - **Omega-3 Fatty Acids-** A specific type of polyunsaturated fat. Found in seafoods like salmon, herring, and tuna but also flax, flaxseed, and walnuts.
    - **Omega-6 Fatty Acids-** Found in many oils such as safflower, soybean, and corn.
- **Saturated Fatty Acids:** A naturally occurring fat with no double bond. These fats are solid at room temperature and are often called the “bad” fat. Found in animal sources like high-fat meat and dairy; other sources include tropical fats like coconut, palm, and palm kernel.
- **Trans Fatty Acids:**
  - **Naturally occurring trans fats-** Produced in the gut of some animals and found in foods from a [ruminant](#) animal such as meat products, milk, cheese, and butter.

- **Artificial trans fats-** Created by an industrial process called hydrogenation; found in many processed foods as Partially Hydrogenated Oil (PHO).

In 2015, the FDA determined that Partially Hydrogenated Oils (PHOs) are no longer “Generally Recognized as Safe” (GRAS). Manufacturers were required to remove PHOs from their food products by January 1, 2020.

### Which fats are “healthy”?

Unsaturated fats have been shown to be the most beneficial in terms of the effect they have on one’s health.

- Monounsaturated fats may help to lower cholesterol levels and decrease the risk of cardiovascular disease. They support good HDL, lower cholesterol, and reduce inflammation.
- Polyunsaturated fats are also beneficial to heart health; the Omega-3 fatty acids additionally lead to decreasing blood triglycerides and lowering blood pressure.
- Omega 6- and Omega 3- fats are called the essential fatty acids. These fats support healthy cholesterol and triglyceride levels and fight inflammation in the body.

So which fats are considered “bad”?

- Trans fats increase LDL cholesterol levels, which leads to increased risk of developing heart disease.
- Saturated fats can increase LDL, total cholesterol, triglycerides, and inflammation in the body.

Our body makes all the cholesterol it needs so we don’t need to add more.

### What do the Dietary Guidelines say about fat intake?

The [2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) recommend limiting the intake of saturated fats to 10% of total calories for all persons over age 2. Some saturated fats are found naturally in foods (high-fat meats), and some are added (butter). The recommendation includes replacing foods higher in saturated fats with foods that are higher in unsaturated fats, with a greater focus on polyunsaturated fats.

In general, over age 2, participants and their families should be encouraged to reach for lean meats, poultry, and fat-free or low-fat dairy while shying away from fried foods and limiting higher fat desserts and snacks. Families should be encouraged to read food labels to find packaged products made with the healthy fats that are most beneficial to their health, such as foods higher in polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats.

Avoid restricting fat and cholesterol for children under age 2.

## How do I know if I am getting the right fats?

To measure fats in blood, a test called the lipid profile is done. This is a complete cholesterol test that can be completed by your healthcare provider to measure the amount of cholesterol and triglycerides in your blood. Completing this test will help to determine if the levels indicate there is any risk to one's health.

The test typically includes these four measurements:

- **Total Cholesterol**- The sum of your blood's cholesterol.
- **Low-density lipoprotein (LDL)**- The "bad" cholesterol; will cause a buildup of fatty deposits in your body that can lead to reduced blood flow.
- **High-density lipoprotein (HDL)**- The "good" cholesterol; will help to carry away the LDLs.
- **Triglycerides**- A type of fat found in our body.

Cholesterol levels should be checked between ages 9-11 and then every five years after.

## WIC's Role

As we are educating families, it is our role to support overall health, and talking about fats is a part of this. Generally, encouraging families to focus on a diet rich in nutrient-dense foods and beverages is the goal, but this isn't always realistic for many participants. Below are some tips to encourage families to get enough "healthy fats" in their daily diet.

- Replace some of the "bad" fats with "healthy" fats. But remember, it's okay to eat the "bad" fats sometimes.
- Try using oils (canola, olive, corn, peanut, soybean, sunflower, safflower) instead of saturated fat like butter, lard, or coconut oil when cooking.
- Try alternatives when making meals; replace beef burgers with turkey, replace butter with a soft or liquid margarine, or try frozen yogurt instead of ice cream.
- Try baking or using an air fryer instead of deep-frying foods.
- Include lots of fruits and vegetables with lean meats or try a meatless option; fill your plate with color!

## Examples of meals with healthy fats:

- **Breakfast:** Whole grain toast with peanut butter or avocado, or yogurt with fruit and granola
- **Lunch:** Salmon or tuna on top of a salad, over rice, or on whole grain bread
- **Dinner:** Chicken Breast with brown rice or whole grain pasta, with a salad or vegetable medley (bring on the color)
- **Snack/Dessert:** Fresh or frozen fruit blended into a smoothie with low-fat milk

**Resources:**

[Nutrition Basics Module](#) (MDH WIC)

[Choose Healthy Fats](#) (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, eatright.org)

[Dietary Fats](#) (American Heart Association)

[The truth about fats: the good, the bad, and the in-between](#) (Harvard Health Publishing)

[Nutrition & Health Info Sheets for Health Professionals - Fat](#) (UC Davis Department of Nutrition)

**Reference – Complete Listing of Hyperlinks:**

[Ruminant](https://www.britannica.com/animal/ruminant) (https://www.britannica.com/animal/ruminant)

[2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#)

(https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/Dietary\_Guidelines\_for\_Americans-2020-2025.pdf)

[Nutrition Basics Module](#)

(https://www.health.state.mn.us/training/cfh/wic/nutrition/modules/mod1nutbas/index.html)

[Choose Healthy Fats](https://www.eatright.org/food/food-groups/fats/choose-healthy-fats) (https://www.eatright.org/food/food-groups/fats/choose-healthy-fats)

[Dietary Fats](https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/fats/dietary-fats) (https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/fats/dietary-fats)

[The truth about fats: the good, the bad, and the in-between](#)

(https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/the-truth-about-fats-bad-and-good)

[Nutrition & Health Info Sheets for Health Professionals - Fat](#)

(https://nutrition.ucdavis.edu/outreach/nutr-health-info-sheets/pro-fat)

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