

The 30 Pound Club

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Fats

More from the questions you sent me—today it's about fat. But rather than give you a lengthy primer on fat, let me hit the main questions:

1. Why are some fats good while others are bad?
2. How can you read a nutrition label to make sense out of the part on fat?

Good Fats vs. Bad Fats

Fats are plentiful in our diet today. The problem isn't so much that some are good while others are bad; it's a question of quantity. The typical American diet has close to 50% of the calories from fat and most of that from saturated fat. Saturated fats are considered bad while monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats are considered good, for the most part.

Why are saturated fats bad? Because they can be chopped up into smaller pieces, and if not used as fuel, will be made into other chemicals including cholesterol. Sat fat isn't thoroughly bad, and trying to eliminate it from your diet may be more trouble than it's worth; if an otherwise healthy food contains a tiny bit of sat fat, don't worry about it. It's important to realize that your body must have some sat fat, and if you don't eat it, your body makes it. As animals, we make sat fat ourselves if we overeat carbohydrates or proteins. It goes back to quantity as I said earlier. Too much saturated fat and our bodies use it to make cholesterol; just enough and we have enough to fuel our activities.

Unsaturated fats come in many forms. Monounsaturated fat simply means it has one double bond in the molecule. Olive oil is an example. The body can't process it exactly the same way as saturated, and we don't make cholesterol from it. The same is true for polyunsaturated fats such as omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids. That's the upside. But not all omega-6 fatty acids are the same; some promote the production of inflammatory hormones that can have a negative effect on our body. I'll be talking about that in the *All About Allergies* webinar on Sunday and Tuesday.

The truly evil fat is trans fat, the byproduct of the hydrogenation of polyunsaturated fats. If you're thinking that processors take a perfectly good fat and make it bad, you're exactly right. Why do they do it? So food products stay fresher on the shelf longer. Because of the change in chemical structure, trans fats have been linked to an increase in cardiovascular disease, even at very low levels of intake. The goal is zero trans fats per day, for you and your children.

So it really isn't a question of good fat and bad fat—it's how much fat. If we keep our fat intake low with no more than 10% of calories from saturated fat, we can handle that very well. If percentages don't work for you, go with grams. Keep your total fat intake between 40 and 60 grams per day, depending on your total caloric goal, with sat fat as small a part of that as possible, and no trans fat.

Fats on Labels

The typical nutrition facts label will give the total calories and right next to it, the calories from fat. That will give you a quick way to calculate the percentage if you can do math in your head. Olive oil would be 100% fat, and half and half for coffee would be 75%.

If doing math in your head isn't your thing, just move down the label. The first item should be total fat in grams. After that, the label will give the grams of saturated fat and then trans fat. If the product has some other type of fat, it will often say monounsaturated fat and polyunsaturated fat; if the food doesn't contain them in any quantity, you won't find them on the label. It's really no more complicated than that. Disregard the Daily Value because it doesn't really apply to anything in the real world.

When it comes to fat intake, go for the best quality such as monounsaturated and omega-3 fatty acids. You'll never be able to avoid the others, and that's fine. I've repeated it throughout this message: the goal is to control fat intake. If you do that, it will help your body weight and your health.

One and Done.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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