

Skinny on Fats: Finding Healthy and Unhealthy Fats in Food

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Fat 411

By now, most of us know that there are good fats and bad fats, and that the good fats play a key role in our overall health and well-being. The confusing part, however, is knowing which fats we should be eating, how much and where to find them. We sat down with Katherine Basbaum, MS, RD, a dietitian with UVA Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Rehabilitation, to answer some of our most pressing questions about dietary fats.

Club Red: What are some of the most common misconceptions about fats?

Katherine Basbaum: I hear a lot of misconceptions about fats, but two stick out in my mind that I see or hear pretty often. The first is so long as it doesn't have trans fats, then it's a good choice. This is not always the case. Many foods that are trans-fat free are still loaded with saturated fat, which has been shown to be almost as bad or unhealthy as trans fat.

The other misconception I see all the time is that so long as a food is made with (or naturally contains) the 'healthy' or 'good' fats, like omega-3s, polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fats, then it is okay to eat that food in abundance without consequences. The truth is that even a source of healthy fat, like walnuts, should be eaten in moderation.



CR: So which fats are the 'healthy' ones, and where can we find them?

KB: The top two healthiest fats are:

- Monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFAs), found in olive oil, canola oil, peanut oil and sesame oil, as well as avocados, olives, almonds and peanuts.
- Polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs), found in soybean oil, corn oil, safflower oil, walnuts, sunflower seeds, tuna, salmon, mackerel, herring and trout. The PUFAs are the fats that contain the often-talked-about omega-3s and omega-6s.

CR: Which fats are dangerous, and what foods are they found in?

KB: The most dangerous fats are trans fats and saturated fats. Trans fats (also called hydrogenated oils) are found in baked goods, fried foods, processed snack foods, and traditional stick margarine and vegetable shortening. Saturated fats are mainly found in animal protein like beef, lamb, pork, chicken (with the skin on), cream, butter, cheese and other whole or reduced-fat dairy products. Saturated fats can also be found in some oils like palm, palm kernel and coconut oil.

CR: Why is fat a necessary part of a healthy diet? How does it fuel the body?

KB: Fats help to support cell growth, protect your organs and keep your body warm. Fats also help absorb important nutrients and produce key hormones in your body. Fat is the predominant fuel source during prolonged exercise. In fact, during lengthy activities like occupations that require manual labor or even working at a desk for eight hours a day, fat supplies about 50-90 percent of the energy required.

CR: Now we know which fats to eat. But how much?

KB: The American Heart Association recommends that the average adult woman consume less than seven percent of daily calories from saturated fat, and 25 to 35 percent of calories from total fat. What does this mean in fat grams? Let's say a woman is eating 1,800 calories a day. Considering one gram of fat has nine calories, her daily fat intake should be no more than 14 grams of saturated fats, and 50 to 70 grams of total fat per day. It's important to remember that **total fat** includes the healthy fats (the MUFAs and the PUFAs) as well as saturated fats.

CR: What are "essential fatty acids," and why are they important?

KB: Essential fatty acids are the omega-3s and omega-6s found in PUFAs, and are crucial for optimal body function. Essential

fatty acids are labeled as such because, as opposed to non-essential fatty acids, the body can't make the essential ones on its own and therefore needs to get them from the diet. Walnuts, sunflower seeds and fatty fish are great sources of essential fatty acids.

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