Dietary Fats
by Vicki L. Dihle

There is a wide variety of dietary fat found in food. Some of these fats are necessary for optimal health and others are actually detrimental to your body, so it's wise to know the differences.

Fat is a necessary nutrient used for some of the body's most basic functions, such as cell membrane production, and hormone production. Without dietary fat, our body would not be able to absorb and utilize the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K from food. On the other hand, too much fat is unhealthy and contributes to weight gain, leading to obesity and diseases like heart disease, diabetes, cancer, gallstones, osteoarthritis and sleep apnea.

Several dietary fats we need to pay attention to include:

- **Polyunsaturated Fats:** At refrigeration and room temperature, these fats usually remain in the liquid form. Research suggests that omega 3 fatty acids may reduce heart disease, and are found mostly in seafood such as salmon, herring and mackerel, but are also in flaxseed, flax oil and walnuts. Other examples of this type of fat include safflower, corn, sunflower, soy and cottonseed oils. These fats lower blood cholesterol by reducing total cholesterol and low-density lipoproteins (LDL—sometimes referred to as "bad" cholesterol).
- **Monounsaturated Fats:** These fats remain liquid at room temperature, but may solidify if refrigerated. They are found in avocados, nuts, and olive, canola and peanut oils. Like polyunsaturated fats, these fats can lower LDL. In addition, they appear to increase high-density lipoproteins (HDL—sometimes referred to as "healthy" cholesterol).
- **Saturated Fat:** Typically found in animal products, saturated fats are most often solid or "waxy" at room temperature. Examples include cheese, cream, butter, whole milk, red meat, pork, lamb and poultry. Saturated fats are also found in coconut, palm and tropical oils. Our bodies can manufacture LDL cholesterol using saturated fats. While newer research suggests that these fats may not be the health risk once supposed, numerous organizations continue to point to saturated fats as a risk factor for cardiovascular disease.
- **"Trans" Fat:** Also known as trans-fatty acid, these fats are created by a process known as hydrogenation: hydrogen molecules are added to vegetable oil (liquid) under pressure, resulting in a solid. Shortening and some margarines are examples. Hydrogenated or "trans" fats are common in commercial baked goods (crackers, cookies, cakes and muffins), fried foods (doughnuts and French fries), and some margarines. A good clue to determining if a food contains trans fat is to read labels and look for the words "hydrogenated," "partially hydrogenated" and "trans fat." This type of fat is particularly troublesome as our bodies not only use it to make LDL, but it appears to lower HDL in the bloodstream – a bad combination of effects.

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