

UNDERSTANDING GOOD AND BAD FATS



WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT FAT?

In the Western world, fat consumption is far too high. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has estimated that by 2015, 1.6 billion adults will be overweight – that's almost a quarter of the world's population! Although we all need a small amount of fat in our diet, we need to be careful about the amount of fat we're consuming, as there are many associated health problems such as weight gain, and higher risk of diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

HOW MUCH FAT SHOULD WE EAT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In the UK, the current GDAs for adults aged 19 to 50 are:

Men = 90g total fat = no more than 30g should be saturated fat

Women = 70g total fat = no more than 20g should be saturated fat

Having fat in our diets gives us energy, provides insulation, and protects our internal organs. Fat also helps with brain development and cell growth, and provides us with the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K, which are necessary for many important functions in the body including eyesight, and bone and nerve development. It is also a source of essential fatty acids, which our body is unable to produce on its own.

TYPES OF FAT: SATURATED OR "BAD FATS"

Saturated fats are usually of animal origin and are found naturally (in varying levels) in all meat and fish. They are also found in processed foods – meats, pastry, cakes, coconut, milk, cheese, creme fraîche, biscuits, cream and lard for example.

A diet rich in saturated fat can cause the cholesterol level in the blood to rise, which in turn can lead to thinning of the arteries, potentially causing a blockage and increasing the risk of a heart attack.



We should all aim to keep the levels of saturated fat in our diet low. Check the fat figure in the nutritional information panel on food labels and use the following as a guide:

Red = HIGH = more than 20g fat per 100g

Amber = MEDIUM = between 3g and 20g per 100g

Green = LOW = between 0g and 3g per 100g

NUTRITION			GDA	
Typical values	per 100g	per pack	adult	per pack
Energy kJ	450	1345		
Energy kcal	105	315	2000	16%
Protein	7.9g	23.7g	45g	53%
Carbohydrate	8.8g	26.4g	230g	11%
of which sugars	1.2g	3.6g	90g	4%
Fat	4.2g	12.6g	70g	18%
of which saturates	2.7g	8.1g	20g	41%
Fibre.	1.2g	3.6g	24g	15%
Sodium	0.24g	0.72g	2.4g	30%
Equivalent as salt	0.60g	1.80g	6g	30%
GDA = Guideline daily amount				

This label shows 4.2g of fat per 100g, so this would be classed as medium. Don't forget that the traffic light labelling system can help you here.

(See *Understanding traffic light labelling* for more information).

TYPES OF FAT: UNSATURATED OR "GOOD FATS"

There are two kinds of unsaturated fat:

monounsaturated (found in olive oil and rapeseed oil), and **polyunsaturated** (found in oily fish, nuts and seeds).

As well as reducing cholesterol, polyunsaturated fats provide two essential fatty acids: omega 3 and omega 6. Omega 3 is found naturally in oily fish (see *All about oily fish*). The best source of omega 6 is seeds and their oils (hemp, pumpkin, sunflower, sesame and corn). These fatty acids are also found in a wide variety of nuts, grains and vegetables – so an easy way of getting some into your diet is using vegetable oils for cooking. Omega 6 fatty acids are also helpful in the clotting of blood, skin health, and to help lower cholesterol.

It is worth remembering that labelling can sometimes be a little misleading: a bag of walnuts might have a red label on them because they are high in fat, but since they contain polyunsaturated fats, which help to protect your heart, they're actually a healthy food in moderation.



TYPES OF FAT: TRANS FATS

Trans fats are a man-made type of fat and should be avoided where possible. They're made by pumping hydrogen into vegetable oil to make it solid, then used in food production. It is thought that the presence of trans fats in the diet raises cholesterol in the blood, which in turn increases the risk of coronary heart disease. Trans fats are often used in processed foods like cheap chocolate, cakes and deep-fried products.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO TRY AND REGULATE THE AMOUNT AND TYPES OF FAT WE EAT?

A healthy diet is all about balance. Bear in mind the proportion of fatty foods you should be having at each meal according to the eatwell plate (see *Understanding the eatwell plate*), and try to make sure your meal includes foods from all of the different food groups. Fat is a small, but essential, part of the diet. Try to make good choices about the types of fat you eat and this should help to keep your cholesterol low, and your arteries healthy.

TIPS TO REDUCE FAT INTAKE

- When cooking or making dressings, try measuring out your oil with a spoon to give you more control over the amount you use.
- Drizzle fish or meat with a little oil and rub it in before cooking rather than putting oil in your pan.
- Grill, poach, boil, steam or bake food where possible.
- Use beans or lentils to bulk out stews and casseroles, and watch how much meat you use because meats are often high in saturated fat.
- Use yoghurt instead of cream whenever you can.