



Get The Skinny On Fat: ***All Fats Are Not Created Equal***

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Since at least the 1980's, when strong evidence linking cholesterol and coronary artery disease (CAD) was recognized, efforts have been undertaken to get Americans to lower their blood cholesterol levels. As a result, some national health organizations have consistently preached the message to us to reduce the intake of total and saturated fats in our diet. While these efforts are laudable, the consequences have not always been positive. First, there is the general impression by the public at large that "all fats are bad." And second, there has been a resultant increase in the percentage of caloric intake in the form of carbohydrates (sugars). This has been accompanied by a parallel increase in the rates of diabetes and obesity in our society (clearly not good for our hearts!). With the coming of the New Year, it is a good time to reexamine the types/amount of fat in our diet.

There are 4 main kinds of fat: trans, saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated. With apologies to Thomas Jefferson, these fats are **NOT** all created equal. In fact, it is the first two that we need to avoid and the latter two that we need to get more of! **Trans fats** are the worst of all, hence the recent move by certain cities (and even countries!) to ban them. The FDA now requires the labels of all foods and supplements to delineate their content of trans fat, making it easier for the public to make more informed choices. Trans fats are useful to the food industry for a number of reasons, including increasing product shelf life. They are found mostly in bakery products, margarines, packaged snack foods, and deep-fried fast foods. There is abundant evidence that the risk of CAD increases with the consumption of this type of fat. It has been shown to raise LDL (bad) and lower HDL (good) cholesterol levels, to promote inflammation within the body, and to cause endothelial dysfunction (the earliest abnormality of arteries in atherosclerosis). The second "bad" fat, **saturated fat**, has long been known to raise cholesterol levels (both LDL and HDL) and to increase risk of CAD. Saturated fats are found in fried fast foods, fatty meats, dairy products, and coconut and palm kernel oils.

The other types of fat, namely monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fat may actually be **beneficial**. Major sources of **monounsaturated fat** include olive oil, canola oil, avocados, and almonds. Several studies have shown that a **Mediterranean-type diet**, where the main source of fat is olive or canola oil coupled with an increased intake of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, can **decrease** the risk of CAD. Monounsaturated fats lower LDL cholesterol levels and may alter LDL particles so that they are less likely to participate in the process of atherosclerosis. **Polyunsaturated fats** are called

“essential” because the body cannot manufacture them, and they thus must be obtained through the diet. One very important type of polyunsaturated fat is known as “**omega-3**” fatty acid. Plant-based omega-3 fatty acids can be found in flaxseed, English walnuts, soybeans, and leeks. However, it is the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish (**EPA and DHA**) which have been found to have major cardiovascular benefits. These include a decreased risk of sudden cardiac death, fatal myocardial infarction, stroke, and in high doses, they are known to be very effective in reducing elevated triglyceride (fat) levels. In addition, they appear to have potent anti-inflammatory effects. Lastly, both monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats can help to prevent HDL-cholesterol levels from dropping when they are substituted for saturated fat in the diet.

In summary, almost every one of us could benefit from a **reduced intake of saturated fat** by avoiding fried and fast foods and eating lean cuts of beef and low-fat dairy products. **Trans fats have no benefit** and should be reduced to absolute minimums. Finally, eating **more monounsaturated fats**, in the form of olive or canola oil, avocados, and nuts, and **more polyunsaturated fats**, in the form of cold-water (fatty) fish and flaxseed, can help lead to improved cardiovascular health. Remember, all fats are not created equal!