

Fats

Fats are an important part of our diet; they provide the body with energy and with some important vitamins (for example, vitamins A and D). They also contain essential fats which the body is unable to make for itself. However, eating too much fat can be unhealthy. This Food Fact Sheet will describe the different types of fats and which foods to eat to get a healthy balance.

Getting the balance right

Compared to other nutrients in our diet fats and oils are very high in calories (kcal) – 9 kcal/g (protein and carbohydrate both have 4 kcal/g). So if one tablespoon of oil (or 15g of fat) gives us 135kcal you can see why it is important for our health and our waistlines, that we watch the amount of fat and fatty foods we eat.

Types of fat

Some fats are far better for our health than others. There are three main types of fat – saturated, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated – most foods contain a mixture of these three fats.

Saturated and trans fats are considered to be less healthy because they can raise our blood cholesterol levels and increase our risk of heart disease:

Saturated fats – include harder fats like lard, butter, fats on meat and are found in fatty meat products, pastries, cakes, biscuits, in full fat dairy foods, and take-away meals.

Trans fats (hydrogenated vegetable oils) – these are vegetable oils which have been processed to make them hard; this also makes them less healthy, like saturated fats. They are found in processed foods, like cakes pastries, and biscuits. They may appear on the list of ingredients as 'partially hydrogenated vegetable fats/oil'.

Unsaturated and omega-3 fats/oils are considered to be better for our health as they can help to lower blood



cholesterol. Try replacing some of the less healthy fats with these:

Unsaturated fats/oils – found generally in plant foods such as seeds/grains, nuts, vegetables and fruit. They can be either polyunsaturated, found in sunflower, soya, corn, and sesame oils or monounsaturated like olive and rapeseed oils. Evidence suggests that the inclusion of the monounsaturated fats are particularly good as they help to promote the healthier type of cholesterol in our blood. Include these in your diet by using small amounts of the oils to cook with (instead of lard or butter), in salad dressings, or as spreading fats. Almonds, hazelnuts and peanuts are rich sources of monounsaturated fats and if eaten unsalted, just a small daily handful would contribute towards a healthy diet. Fortified spreading fats will provide us with small amounts of vitamins A and D.

Omega-3 fats – a group of unsaturated fats called 'essential' fatty acids as they cannot be made in the body in sufficient amounts. These important fats can help prevent the blood from clotting, help regulate the heart rhythm and are important to improve survival after a heart attack.

Oily fish such as pilchards, mackerel, salmon and sardines are excellent sources of omega-3. They are also good providers of vitamin D, which is found in very few foods.

Plant foods can provide omega-3s in much smaller amounts e.g. rapeseed, soya, flax, linseed oils, and walnuts. We really need to increase our intake of these fats – there is growing evidence that they offer many other health benefits too.

By reducing the unhealthy saturated fats and replacing some of them with the healthier unsaturated fats and oils we will be getting a better balance for our heart health.

How much?

We all need some fat in our diet but eating too much of any fat makes us more likely to become overweight. This increases our likelihood of developing more serious health problems like Type 2 diabetes, joint problems, and some cancers. No more than one third of our total fat intake should come from the saturated types of fat in the diet; for men this would be no more than 30g/day and for women 20g/day. Trans fats should make up no more than 2% of our total energy intake –roughly 5g each day for adults. Unsaturated fats (poly or mono) should provide the rest of our fat intake and this includes the omega-3 fats.

In recent years we have been encouraged to reduce our total fat intake. We can use food labelling to help us to do this.

Some food labels now give us 'Reference Intakes' (RIs) for fats and calories, which (unless the label says otherwise) are based on an average-sized woman doing an average amount of physical activity –

Energy: 8,400 kJ/2,000kcal

Total fat: 70g

Saturates: 20g

This is a guide only and intake will vary from day to day. It shows that approximately one third of our total daily calories would be provided from our fat intake.

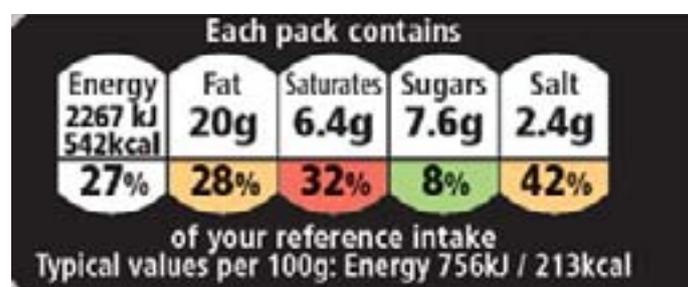
The Nutrition Panel on the back or side of food packs can be used to tell us the amount of fat in 100g of a food (the percentage), and it tells us how much of the total fat comes from the saturated type of fat; some labels even give you the amount of mono and/or polyunsaturated fat present. As you see from the example below, the total fat is listed first, and on many labels the amount per portion is listed as well as per 100g.

Nutrition Information		
	Typical Values	
	Per 100g	Per serving (16g)
Fat	22.6g	3.6g
<i>of which saturates</i>	9.8g	1.6g
<i>polyunsaturates</i>	8.2g	1.3g
<i>monounsaturates</i>	4.6g	0.7g

This information is useful as it helps us to decide whether a food contains 'a lot' or 'a little' fat (and saturated fat) based on the following guide:-

Nutrient	High ('a lot')	Low ('a little')
<i>Fat</i>	17.5g/100g	Less than 3g/100g
<i>Saturated fat</i>	5g/100g	Less than 1.5g/100g

More recently, food manufacturers have been also including a colour-coded system of food labelling on the front of packs which allow the consumer to quickly see at a glance what key nutrients and calories a food contains; foods with over 17.5g fat per 100g (17.5% fat) would be red for fat, those between 3 and 17.5% would be amber and those with under 3% would be green.



For example, the label above, shows that each packet will provide you with 20g of fat, which represents 28% (just over ¼) of your daily RI for fat and informs us that 6.4g fat is of the saturated type of fat.

Summary

Fats occur naturally and in many processed foods. Fat can affect your health depending on how much and which type you eat. As a rule, eat less saturated and trans fats and consider replacing them with healthier unsaturated and omega-3 fats. Reading food labels will help you to make healthier choices and to get the balance of fats right in your diet.

Further information: Food Fact Sheets on other topics including Trans Fats, Labelling and Omega-3 are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

Useful links:

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/Fat.aspx