Extension Service
West Virginia University

WLG 140

Fat: The Good, the Bad, the Ugly

Guendoline Brown, WVU Extension Specialist, Nutrition and Health
Kimberly Morris, WVU Graduate Student

Fat

Fat plays an important role in our bodies and in our diets, but excessive intake of this major nutrient has been cited as being bad for our health. The reason fats are both good and bad for our health has a lot to do with the types of fats in foods and everything to do with the amount of these fats that you eat. Getting all of the fat facts will help consumers make the right healthy food choices.

Fat facts

A diet high in fat has been found to increase the risk of developing obesity, diabetes, and heart disease (all of which are occurring at a rapid rate in this country). Eating too many foods that are high in fat and cholesterol may further increase the risk of developing heart disease and high blood pressure as well. In addition, eating excess fat contributes to weight gain. This is because it is a very energy-dense nutrient. Per gram, fat provides our bodies with twice as many calories as carbohydrates and proteins. Two significant recommendations for a heart-healthy diet include limiting the amount of fat (particularly the saturated type) and cholesterol consumed. The message sounds easy enough; avoid foods high in fat and cholesterol and reduce the risk of compromising your health. However, we still need a certain amount of fat in our diets, and there are three types of fats to consider.

Why we need fat

Our bodies receive energy from the carbohydrates, proteins, and fats in the foods we eat. We require all three energy sources to support and maintain a healthy metabolic state. Fat is needed to support cell function, insulate the body, and offer protection from injury. Fat is necessary for the intestinal absorption of vitamins A, D, E, and K. Fat plays a survival role by making sure that we have additional energy stored in case we face starvation. In addition, the properties of fat make foods that contain it very tempting and enjoyable to eat. Fat accentuates the flavor of foods and adds a texture that is pleasing to the palate.

Responding to consumers' demand for healthy foods that taste good, the food industry has created low-, reduced-, and fat-free versions of these high-fat products. While low- and fat-free products can serve as healthy alternatives, fat-free does not necessarily mean calorie-free. In fact, some fat-free products have a significant amount of or even more calories per serving when compared with the original high-fat product.

The good fats

The good fats contain just as many calories as the bad and ugly fats, but unlike the bad fats, good fats contain properties that are beneficial to health. Good fats, also known as ***un***saturated and polyunsaturated fats, are plant oils characterized as being liquid at room temperature. Examples of unsaturated oils include canola, olive, safflower, and peanut oil. When eaten in moderation, good fats may reduce the risk of developing heart disease because they can reduce blood cholesterol in the body. Polyunsaturated fats include soy, sunflower, corn, and flaxseed oils. Fatty fish like salmon, tuna, and mackerel are also rich in polyunsaturated fats. Some unsaturated and polyunsaturated oils contain essential fatty acids. Essential fats are absolutely necessary for the growth and development of body

– continued –

The good fats (continued)

cells and hormones. Because our bodies cannot make essential fatty acids, we *must* get them from the foods we eat. Soybean and flaxseed are rich in essential fatty acids. Omega-3 and omega-6 are essential fatty acids.

The bad fats

The bad fats are saturated fats. Saturated fats, which are primarily animal fats, are characterized as being solid at room temperature. Eating too many saturated fats can increase the body's blood cholesterol, which, in turn, promotes heart disease. Whole-fat dairy products – such as milk, cheese, cream, butter, and animal products like meat and poultry products – are examples of foods that contain saturated fats. There are also saturated fats that come from plant sources; these include coconut, palm, and palm kernel oils. Keep reading to see how to limit the amount of saturated fat in your diet.

The ugly fats

The ugly fats are trans fatty acids or trans fats. These fats are ugly for two reasons . . . one, trans fats, like saturated fats, can raise blood cholesterol levels (possibly to an even greater extent than do saturated fats), and two, many products that contain trans fats may be mistaken for healthy substitutes because they may be advertised as "low in saturated fat." These "ugly" fats can be found in some saturated-fat animal products like meats, milk, and dairy foods. However, the majority of trans fatty acid in foods are created from the man-made food process known as hydrogenation. This process extends the product's shelf life by manipulating the unsaturated fats in certain products to act more like saturated fat (become solid at room temperature). Trans fats can be found in margarines, salad dressings, baked goods, snack foods, fried foods, and many other processed food items. To see if a certain product contains trans fats, look on the label for the list of ingredients. If the first ingredient listed is hydrogenated oil or partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, then the product contains trans fatty acids. If the product contains vegetable shortening, it may contain trans fats as well.

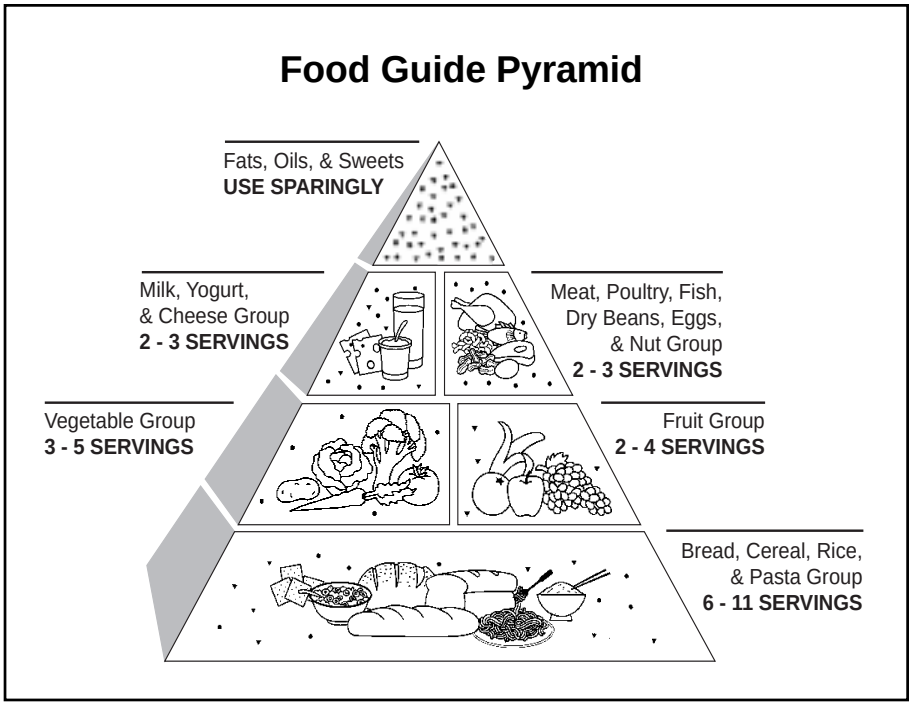
The fat balancing act

In addition to avoiding trans fats and limiting the amount of total fat and cholesterol in your diet, it is important to consider the proportion of saturated to unsaturated fats you consume. It is important not to completely eliminate fat in your diet because if the percent of total fat in your diet is less than what your body needs, your metabolism becomes altered. This altered metabolic state could lead to nutrition-related health problems. However, most Americans receive plenty of fat in their diets. The diet is typically high in saturated fat and proportionately lower in the two types of unsaturated fats. As a general rule, no more than 30 percent of the calories you eat each day should come from total fat. Of this 30 percent total fat, 7 percent to 10 percent should be saturated, 10 percent to 15 percent should be monounsaturated, and 10 percent should be polyunsaturated. Labels on food packages list how much total fat and saturated fat (bad fats) products contain. Unfortunately, not until 2006 will producers be required by law to list the actual percent of trans fats in their products. Allowing consumers to see the actual amount of trans fats foods contain will be a great tool in helping consumers make healthy food choices. To avoid this fat now, simply limit or avoid eating foods that list ingredients made from trans fats (the partially hydrogenated and hydrogenated oils). To learn to balance the good, the bad, and the ugly . . . keep reading.

How can I reduce the amount of bad and ugly fats in my diet?

- **Choose fats wisely.** Trade in the bad and the ugly for the good. Use oils like canola, olive, flaxseed, and soybean instead of butters and margarines. Snack on a handful of nuts or avocado slices instead of fries or chips. For breakfast, avoid or limit eating high-fat breakfast meats and egg yolks. For lunch, swap the mayo for vinegar. For dinner, replace a red meat dish with a fish dish. Use fresh herbs and seasonings to replace butters and oils commonly used to flavor foods like popcorn, vegetables, meats, and breads.
- **Read and compare food labels.** When shopping, look at food labels to find out the calories per serving, total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol the products contain. Compare food labels and ingredients of similar products to make the best choices. Choose products that are lower in total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol. Limit foods that list hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oil as an ingredient (especially if it is the first ingredient). Remember that although an item may be advertised as being "healthy," it still may not be the best choice. A food that claims to be low in saturated fat may not be low in trans fat.

- **Follow the Pyramid.** ***The Food Guide Pyramid*** helps consumers make healthy food choices. The Food Guide Pyramid is designed to help all healthy individuals over the age of 2 meet their daily nutrient needs. The meat and dairy groups contain foods that contribute to a healthy diet, but these groups also contain foods that are high in the bad (saturated) fats. It is important not to limit food groups that contain foods high in fats. The key is to choose the healthiest items offered within these groups.



Choosing healthy meats

- Choose lean cuts of meat.
- Avoid meats with a lot of white marbling (this is fat).
- Trim the skin from poultry.
- Broil, roast, or bake meats instead of frying.
- Marinate lean meats in orange or apple juice instead of gravies or fatty sauces.
- Add spices and seasonings for flavor, rather than butter or other flavored sauces containing a lot of fat.

Choosing healthy dairy products

- Avoid the cholesterol-containing yolks of eggs. Substitute 2 egg whites for 1 whole egg.
- Choose skim, ultra-skim, or reduced-fat milks.
- Choose reduced-fat or low-fat cheeses and dairy products.
- In some dishes, you can replace ice cream with low-fat or nonfat yogurt; in some homemade baked goods, you can substitute applesauce for the oil.

Suggestions for leaders:

- *Have volunteers collect food labels from actual reduced-fat/low-fat packaged food items as well as the labels from the high-fat versions of these products. For an activity, have members examine and discuss the health pros and cons by comparing low- and high-fat versions of the products.*
- *In advance, prepare low-fat dishes from the recipes provided through the* Dining with Diabetes *program or other sources. Have members sample and discuss low-fat dishes that can replace high-fat meals. One idea could be to discuss using low-fat fruit recipes for desserts and snacks. See next page for an example.*

Start simple with this easy-to-make fruit dessert. This low-fat recipe would make a great snack, too.

Chilled Fruit Delight

Ingredients:

16 oz. nonfat vanilla yogurt

1 c. applesauce

1 can (8 oz.) crushed pineapple in juice, drained

1 c. blueberries or sliced strawberries

1 banana, thinly sliced

½ c. low-fat granola

Optional – 2 tablespoons sliced almonds (toasted)

Directions:

Blend the yogurt and applesauce together in a large serving bowl. Gently fold in the rest of the ingredients. Chill. Top with granola and serve immediately.

Nutrition facts per serving (½ cup): 130 calories, 0.5 g total fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 50 mg sodium, 1 g dietary fiber, 4 g protein

2004: 1M

ES03-143