

Welcome back to the Fat-factor! (The right fats melt hard fats and actually improve health & slimming!)

After many years of low-fat, less-fat or no-fat products, something strange has happened. Fat has had a makeover. Fat-free products are being pushed aside on the supermarket shelves to make way for products with fat added. Omega-3 fatty acids are now so popular that products which contain them – bread, eggs, milk and cereal are among some of the fortified foods now available – have doubled over the last two years.

In the 1980's most of us learned that fat equals bad. Weight gain, clogged arteries, lumpy thighs, death... However, since then, research has found so many reasons why fat is good for you that some types are virtually considered a healthy food.

Fat helps fill you up, so you may eat fewer calories overall. (So, eating fat can actually make you thinner.) It keeps the membranes of our cells permeable, vital for efficient transport of nutrients to the cells and waste products out of them. Vitamins A, D, E and K need fat for absorption. Some research suggests that fats may actually improve brain function. Alzheimer patients, given an omega-3 supplement, showed improved brain cell activity, while women who eat oily fish regularly during pregnancy tend to have children with better vision, behavior and cognitive development.

But to enjoy any of these benefits you need to eat the right kind of fat. Unfortunately, we're a nation with a love of the wrong sort. Fish and chips, bangers and mash, fruit crumble and custard, Sunday roast – there's barely a signature English dish which isn't saturated with saturated fats. Comfort foods, too - doughnuts, biscuits, burgers, chips and hot chocolate are all full of bad fats. (Research has found that foods high in carbohydrates and 'bad' fats can actually slow down the cascade of damaging hormones like cortisol that are released in times of stress, though).

“British women should eat about 70g of fat a day, with a maximum of 20g of saturated fat,” says Anna Denny of the British Nutrition Foundation. “It is not the case that the lower the total fat intake the better. Even those dieting should go down to, but not much below, this level. We need fats for energy, health, cell function and pregnancy. We recommend that people lower their intake of saturated fats, in processed food and meat, and replace them with healthy fats. “Seventy grams of fat is about 35 per cent of your total calorie intake, and you need to make sure those ‘fat’ calories count by choosing healthy ones. To give you an incentive, a study in Pennsylvania, USA looked at 50,000 women and found that a low-fat diet (29 per cent was the average) did not protect against heart disease, breast- or colon cancer.

Seventy five per cent of us now look at food labels. But when it comes to fat, few of us know quite what we are looking for. You don't need to get rid of all saturated fat – many of us would still like to save a little of the daily quota for butter, and that's fine as long as you don't have a lot of it – so read on for your guide to the good, bad and ugly when it comes to fats.

Do you want fat with that?

How to get healthier fats into your diet

Salads

Replace sunflower oil with extra virgin olive oil.

One study found that eating tomatoes with extra virgin oil leads to 20 per cent higher antioxidant activity in blood plasma than eating them with sunflower oil

“Olive oil is a monounsaturated fat that helps lower cholesterol,” explains Denny. Some studies suggest olive oil is connected with lower rates of colon and skin cancer. “Olive oil also contains omega-9s, an essential fatty acid that you need for good skin, energy, brain function and joint health,” says nutritionist Natalie Savona. So, don't say no to that salad dressing as it may be healthier with fat.

Best of all, a drizzle of healthy oil makes salad more satiating, so it fills you up for longer and helps the body absorb essential fat-soluble vitamins like E and A. Buy extra virgin olive oil, as this is the oil from the first pressing of the ripe olives and will be highest in antioxidants. Keep it in a cool dark place so it doesn't go rancid.

Also good:

Udo's Choice Ultimate Oil Blend

This is an organic plant oil that's rich in a balance of fatty acids, and the taste is mild enough for it to make a great addition to dressings (with a good vinegar) and even smoothies.

Seed and nut oils

“Hemp oil, and walnut oil contain omega 3s which are good for your heart and cell membranes,” says Denny.

Argan oil

A predominately monounsaturated oil which is rich in omega-6 fatty acids. It's thought to help regulate cholesterol and reduce inflammation.

Worth avoiding:

Ready-made salad dressings

Many of these contain hydrogenated trans-fats which can damage arteries and increase the risk of heart disease.

Stir-fries

Replace olive oil with vegetable, rapeseed or groundnut oil

“Vegetable, rapeseed and groundnut are all rich in monounsaturated fat and less likely to oxidize and create free radicals at high temperatures than other oils,” says Denny. Rapeseed is great for woks – it's light, rich in vitamin E and doesn't have a taste.

Also good:

Untoasted sesame oil

Adding this to stir fries just before you serve tastes great and contains vitamins E and B, magnesium, copper, calcium and iron. But don't cook with it as it burns.

Pumpkin seed oil

Add this for a real flavour boost when you finish cooking – it's rich in essential fatty acids, vitamins E and A, and zinc.

Worth avoiding:

Stir-frying with olive oil

It burns at high temperatures increasing the amount of unhealthy free radicals in the process.

Snacks

Replace cakes and chocolate with pumpkin and sunflower seeds

Ever since The Harvard School Of Public Health found eating seeds helped people lose weight and keep it off for longer than eating a very low-fat diet, pumpkin seeds and sunflower seeds have become the skinny person's snack of choice.

“Seeds contain essential fatty acids (EFAs) – called essential because the body can't make them itself – that form the membrane of every skin cell. EFAs keep skin clear

– without them skin gets dry and you're more likely to get eczema and spots," says Savona.

Many of us are low in essential fats, but they help brain function, coordination, immune system and mood. Increase your intake and you're less likely to suffer depression and PMS, and new research has found essential fats even slash your risk of developing Alzheimer's. There are three EFAs – omega 3,6 and 9 – and they work best when you get a mix of them, so eat a combination of pumpkin and sunflower seeds on your muesli and smoothies.

“Aim for a tablespoon of pumpkin and sunflower seeds a day.” Suggests nutritionist Patrick Holford, author of the *New Optimum Nutrition Bible*

Also good:

Cranberries infused with cranberry-seed oil

“This new snack is a more concentrated source of omega-3s than something like flaxseed oils and has a more popular taste,” says Melanie Hickey, a naturopath at Holland & Barrett, where it's available. “The cranberry-seed oil is extracted and then used to coat the berries.

Sesame-seed snack bars

Molded with syrup. These are rich in good quality monounsaturated fats.

Peanut butter on rice cakes

Peanuts are high in protein, rich in antioxidants, and rich in polyunsaturated fat (better than the fat in many snacks).

Worth avoiding:

Cakes (particularly with cream), caramel bars, chocolate and biscuits

These are all prone to being high in saturated fat. “If you're going to eat crisps as an occasional snack, opt for the lower-fat versions. Many crisps have lowered their saturated-fat content without compromising on taste,” says Denny.

Supplements

Take fish oil or flaxseed oil instead of cod-liver oil

“A balance of omega 3, 6 and 9 fats helps energy levels, digestion, memory and skin,” says Hickey. “But most of us consume too much omega 6 and not enough omega 3.” A supplement can help you rebalance. “Try a fish oil or flaxseed (also called linseed) if you're vegetarian.” Flaxseed is a rich source of omega-3 fatty acids but the

seeds themselves have a hard outer coating which makes them difficult to digest making a supplement preferable.

Also good:

A Micro-algae supplement

Use sunflower oil

Something like Spirulina is rich in omega 3s, as well as other nutrients, and is suitable for vegetarians.

Worth avoiding:

Cod liver oils

“Liver oils are high in vitamin A which you can have too much of,” says Hickey. Worries about over-fished cod stocks and the risk of toxins being concentrated in cod livers have also reduced the popularity of liver oils. If you are concerned, look for fish oils made from deep sea fish rather than farmed.

General cooking

Use sunflower oil

Despite recent claims that coconut oil is making a comeback – three American books this year claim it is a weight-loss miracle – it is saturated fat with a strong taste. Plus, the evidence that it will boost metabolism and keep you full for longer is sketchy, making sunflower a much healthier choice. “It is rich in polyunsaturated fat which lowers bad cholesterol,” says Denny.

Also good:

Sunflower margarine or walnut oil for baking

Walnut oil is high in an antioxidant compound which has been found to inhibit the growth of cancer cells. Add to dishes that will benefit from the crushed walnut taste. (It’s not suitable for frying, though.)

Cold-pressed avocado oil for searing meat, fish and vegetables

This rich, light green oil contains more vitamin E than olive oil, as well as carotenes and chlorophyll which act as antioxidants, it has a high smoke point so is good for searing meat, fish and vegetables.

Worth avoiding:

Blended oils

Designed for cooking, they can contain hydrogenated vegetable oil. Also avoid hard margarines that have ‘hydrogenated fat’ on the label.