

Saturated fat and your health

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New statement says it's time to stop obsessing about low fat foods and focus on a diet that's refreshingly simple.

The facts about dietary fat are evolving as researchers study this topic. What's clear is that a healthy diet filled with natural, whole food rather than processed food is a smart overall eating plan, and is more practical and attainable than counting quantities of individual nutrients.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation just released a [position statement](#) entitled Saturated Fat, Heart Disease and Stroke, which takes a closer look at how dietary choices affect heart disease risk. Here's an overview.

Overall diet matters most

Over the past 20 years, we've seen a variety of nutrients in the spotlight for causing poor heart health. But the overall quality of your diet will have more impact on heart health than focusing on any one nutrient.

Nutrition research shows that a diet based on whole, unprocessed foods, in appropriate portion sizes, can decrease your risk for heart disease and stroke. This healthy, balanced eating plan is made up of:

- vegetables and fruit
- whole grains
- proteins from various sources, which can include:
 - beans and lentils
 - nuts and seeds
 - lower fat dairy products or alternatives
 - lean meats, poultry and fish.

When you eat natural, whole foods, you leave less room for highly processed, non-nutritive foods such as candy, sugary drinks, processed meats and snack foods. That's a smart plan!

The problem with “low fat” foods

The confusion around fats and their impact on our health has led to a proliferation of processed foods labelled “low fat” on grocery store shelves. While these products (from chips to frozen entrees to desserts) may indeed be lower in fat than some others, that doesn't necessarily make them healthy. In fact, these foods are often highly processed and loaded with calories, sodium and refined carbohydrates, including sugar. The focus on “low fat” has not benefitted Canadians' diets – another good reason to rely on whole, unprocessed foods.

Where are we with saturated fat?

Research provides a mixed picture of the association between saturated fat, heart disease and stroke. Early studies found an association existed, while more recent studies have found no such association. These mixed findings have been the focus of recent scientific debate, and show us that saturated fats are complex.

Saturated fats are found in meat, butter, cheese, tropical oils (such as coconut) and many processed foods, like cake and ice cream. Most of the saturated fat in the average North American diet doesn't come from whole foods like beef or coconuts. Instead it comes from processed foods such as pizza, cakes, cookies, donuts and ice cream. This leads to the obvious question: Are the saturated fats the problem, or is it the overall calorie, sugar and fat content in these poor quality food choices?

Of course, the food source that contains the saturated fat – think donuts vs. chicken – may have different effects on cardiovascular risk. Additional studies are required to test this.

The bottom line: If you mostly eat whole foods, a small pat of butter will not harm your health. But if your diet is based on fast foods and processed items, butter will add to the fatty foods you are already eating. Bad diets are not improved by manipulating one nutrient.

Avoid trans fat

The one constant that is not in dispute is the harm of artificially produced trans fat on heart health. This fat raises LDL (bad) cholesterol, lowers HDL (good) cholesterol, and should be avoided. Trans fats have been linked with up to a 10-fold higher risk of heart disease.

Trans fats are still widespread in our food supply, despite a voluntary reduction by food companies directed by Health Canada. This helped a bit, but the goal is to have no artificial trans fat in the diet. Reduce your intake by avoiding foods that contain partially hydrogenated oil, hard margarine or shortening, and cutting back on commercial baked goods, which have the most trans fat.

So what should you eat?

Fat may be a confusing topic; we all need a small amount in our diet. Fortunately, the bottom line is simple: Heart disease prevention comes from whole food-based diets, filled with vegetables, fruit, whole grains, lean protein (including lower fat dairy and alternatives), fish, legumes, nuts and seeds – and fat is naturally found in this diet! Eating this way means not having to worry about any one nutrient in isolation. It's the big picture that matters most.