Dietary Fats and Your Heart – Choosing Wisely
Advice from the National Lipid Association Clinician’s Lifestyle Modification Toolbox

Why should I know about fats in food?

Fat is found in many foods and is a source of energy. Fat has a lot of calories, but helps your body absorb some nutrients, such as some vitamins. Fat also gives food flavor and will help you feel full after a meal. Some fats are better for your heart than others. Unhealthy fats, such as many saturated fats (SFA) and trans fat, can raise your “bad” LDL-cholesterol and increase your risk for heart disease. Healthier fats are monounsaturated (MUFA) and polyunsaturated (PUFA) fats. Using these fats in place of SFA can lower your “bad” LDL-cholesterol and lower your risk of heart disease.

How to Find Healthy and Unhealthy Fats in Food

Using the Nutrition Facts Label

Read the food label to see the grams of all fats in a serving. All high-fat foods have a mix of fats. Healthier foods are higher in MUFA and PUFA. Less healthy foods are higher in SFA and may have trans fat. Choose foods that have more MUFA and PUFA and less SFA. Avoid foods with trans fat—found as partially hydrogenated oil in the ingredient list. The daily SFA limit for heart-healthy eating is less than 7% of your total daily calories. For energy needs of 1,600 calories per day, the saturated fat limit is about 12 grams. High-fat foods can be high in calories. Be aware of your portion sizes to keep your calorie intake at goal and avoid weight gain.

Examples of Foods with Healthy Fats and Unhealthy Fats

Foods rich in healthy fats are avocados, fatty fish like salmon, many kinds of raw and unsalted nuts and nut butters like peanut and almond butters, seeds such as flax and pumpkin seeds, and liquid vegetable oils like canola, corn, olive, peanut, safflower, sesame, soybean, and sunflower oil.

Foods rich in unhealthy fats are fatty and processed meats like bacon, sausage, salami, and hotdogs, some dairy foods like full-fat cheese, whole milk, and cream, solid fats like butter, lard, coconut, and palm oils, foods with partially hydrogenated oils, and deep fried foods like donuts, fried fish, and French fries.

Tips for Choosing Healthy Fats in Meals and Snacks

Choose whole-grain toast topped with 2 TBSP avocado or almond butter instead of donuts or pastries

Use skim or 1% milk, low-fat yogurt, or soymilk with no added sugar

At lunch, add avocado to sandwiches and salads instead of cheese

Add skinless poultry or fatty fish like salmon and tuna to a mixed green salad

Grill fish or skinless chicken for dinner more often than steak or pork

Choose lean-cuts of red meat like “round” or “loin” with all visible fat trimmed OR lean ground meats

Prepare lean meats by baking, broiling, grilling, or sautéing in 1 TBSP liquid vegetable oil

Snack on 1 oz. raw or unsalted nuts or seeds, low-fat yogurt with fresh fruit, or hummus and raw veggies

A registered dietitian nutritionist can help you make a heart-healthy meal plan that works best for your lifestyle, and support you in your journey to a healthful dietary pattern.

This information is part of the Clinician’s Lifestyle Modification Toolbox courtesy of the National Lipid Association.