

Fat Facts and Phobias

By Allison Tannis, BSc., MSc

It's a fat phobic society. But, Are all fats bad? New diets encourage fat intake, while the food guide tells us to avoid it. The facts, and phobias of fat are confused in today's society and our health is suffering because of it.

The fat phobia is founded on four key things: historical obsession with diets, media coverage, the 'Barbie Phenomenon' that thin is desirable, and scientific association between fat intake and cancer and heart disease.

The last two decades of our fat obsession has left its marks. Store aisles are full of low fat, fat-free labels. However, even though fat consumption has decreased, we've gotten fatter. Why? 1) We eat too much and exercise too little. 2) Weight loss is not just about fat consumption. 3) And, not all fat is bad.

There are many types of fat. Some are worse than others. The worst fat is trans fat. Trans fatty acids are in foods because as the food industry switched from butter to vegetable oil, they partially hydrogenated the vegetable oil to make it stable in heat. Trans fatty acids are present in food items like crackers, cookies, French fries and those with ingredients such as partially hydrogenated vegetable oil and shortening. Add up the value of the saturated, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats and subtract that from the total fat to get the amount of trans fats in a product.

Saturated fats, as do trans fats, lower good cholesterol (HDL) and raise bad cholesterol (LDL) levels, thereby increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease. These fats should be avoided.

Monounsaturated fats are listed on food labels. These fats are generally not ones to be greatly concerned with. In fact, a diet high in monounsaturated fatty acids may have healthy benefits for the heart and memory.

Polyunsaturated fatty acids are the best fats of all. These include essential fatty acids (e.g. omega-3, omega-6 and omega-9 fatty acids). Essential fatty acids are called essential because your body can not manufacture them – you must consume them to have them in your body. For this reason, many North Americans are deficient in these healthy fats.

Omega-3 fatty acids are found in fish and flax. They promote good inflammation and minimize damaging inflammation. Hence, many scientific studies have noted omega-3 fatty acids' beneficial effects on Alzheimers, ADHD, depression, heart disease, arthritis, and cancer.

Omega-6 fatty acids are also very healthy fats. These are generally found in plants. Science has found omega-6 fatty acids to be beneficial for cardiovascular, skin and joint health.

Proper utilization of fats by the body depends on a proper ratio of good and bad fats. Omega-9s are part of a good fatty acid supplementation regime as they help ensure that a healthy balance is obtained, even though they aren't essential.

Remember that some fats are good. Be sure to seek out essential fatty acids in whole foods and supplements. Avoid trans and saturated fat, and enjoy healthy living.

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