

Dietary fat and your health

What is dietary fat?

Dietary fat refers to the fats and oils found in animal and plant foods, and those added to processed foods.

Dietary fat is made up of fatty acids. There are 2 main types of fatty acids: saturated and unsaturated. Food sources of fat are called saturated or unsaturated depending on how much of each type of fatty acid they contain. For example, butter is a saturated fat because it has mainly saturated fatty acids. Olive oil is an unsaturated fat because it has mainly unsaturated fatty acids.

Saturated fats are solid at room temperature while unsaturated fats are liquid.

Why is fat important?

Dietary fat has many roles. It:

- Is a major source of energy
- Helps with the absorption of vitamins A, D, E and K
- Is important for brain and nerve function
- Makes you feel full longer
- Adds flavour and texture to foods

What type of fat should I eat most often?

Choose unsaturated instead of saturated fats to help lower your risk of heart disease. The type of fat you eat most often affects your health.

Unsaturated fat

There are 2 main types of unsaturated fats: monounsaturated and polyunsaturated.

Polyunsaturated fats include omega-3 and omega-6 fats.

- Sources of monounsaturated fats include peanuts, nuts, avocados, soft margarines, and oils such as olive, canola, peanut, sunflower and safflower

- Sources of omega-3 polyunsaturated fats include fatty fish such as herring, salmon, mackerel and trout, seeds like flax, chia and hemp, walnuts, and canola and flax oil
- Sources of omega-6 polyunsaturated fats include most plant oils like soybean, corn, peanut and sesame, seeds, nuts and soft margarines

Which types of fat should I limit?

Saturated fat

Sources of saturated fat include fatty meats, poultry skin, high-fat dairy products like whole milk, cream, cheese and butter, and fats such as lard, shortening, ghee, and palm, palm kernel and coconut oils.

Many highly processed foods like bakery products, deep-fried foods and ready-to-eat dishes are also made with ingredients that are high in saturated fat. Saturated fats are often used in highly processed foods because they're less likely to go rancid and help extend the shelf life of food. If you eat these foods, eat them less often and in smaller amounts.

Trans fat

There are 2 sources of trans fat: natural and industry-made.

- Natural sources of trans fat are found in small amounts in certain animal products, such as milk, beef, and lamb. Small amounts of natural sources of trans fat won't harm your heart health. An eating pattern that is low in saturated fat will also be low in trans fat
- Industry-made trans fat is formed during the processing of vegetable oils. In the past, the main sources of industry-made trans fats were partially hydrogenated vegetable oils. These can no longer be added to foods sold in Canada.

How can I add healthy fats to my meals and snacks?

- Prepare foods using vegetable oils, such as olive, canola, or soybean instead of using butter
- Include fatty fish in your meals and snacks. Try using canned salmon, tuna or sardines in sandwiches and wraps or on a salad or crackers
- Try hummus or guacamole as a dip instead of creamy dips like spinach, artichoke or ranch
- Spread soft margarine or nut or seed butters on toast, bagels or sandwiches instead of butter or cream cheese
- Use oil or lower fat yogurt-based salad dressings instead of cream or cheese-based dressings
- Sprinkle flax, chia or hemp seeds on lower fat yogurt, cereals, and salads
- Grab a handful of unsalted nuts and seeds for a quick snack

How do I lower my intake of saturated fat?

At the grocery store

- Choose lower-fat dairy products such as light cream cheese, light ricotta cheese, cheeses that have less than 20% M.F., and milk, yogurt and cottage cheese with 2% M.F. or less
- Limit fatty and processed meats. Choose skinless poultry and lean cuts of meat such as inside or outside round roast, sirloin roast or steak, pork loin, and wild game including deer, bison, moose and caribou
- For packaged food, check the nutrition facts table and choose products that are lower in saturated and trans fat. The percent daily value (%DV) tells you if a food has 'a little' or 'a lot' of saturated and trans fat. 5% DV or less is "a little", 15% DV or more is "a lot"

At home

- Choose healthier cooking methods that use less butter, lard, ghee, shortening, hard margarine, coconut and palm oil. Try methods like broiling, grilling, poaching, steaming, stir-frying or sauteing
- When baking, substitute up to half the fat in your recipe with the same amount of mashed fruit like unsweetened applesauce
- Use more plant-based proteins like tofu, nuts, seeds, beans, peas and lentils. For example, replace meat in a curry or stir-fry with tofu or lentils
- Remove fat from meat and poultry:
 - Trim off visible fat and skin
 - Drain fat after cooking

When eating out

- Ask for nutrition information or look on the restaurant's website ahead of time. Choose dishes that are lower in saturated fat
- Choose baked, grilled, roasted, poached, sautéed or barbecued foods instead of fried, deep-fried or breaded
- For dishes topped with sauce and gravy, ask for less or ask for it to be served on the side
- Choose tomato-based sauces instead of cheese or alfredo sauces
- Look for oil or vinegar-based salad dressings instead of cream-based dressings

For more information

[HealthLinkBC File #68a Heart Healthy Eating for People with High Cholesterol](#)

Canada's Food Guide: Healthy cooking methods:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-guide/eating-support/cooking/healthy-cooking-methods.html>

For nutrition information, call **8-1-1** to speak with a registered dietitian.