

Fats

Just as we all need to eat protein and carbohydrate, we also need to eat fat.

Fat has several very important roles in our bodies. Our cells need it to be healthy, and we also need it so we can absorb vitamins A, D, E, and K. These vitamins are called fat soluble, which means we can only absorb them with the help of fat.

Fat can also provide us with energy (kilojoules or calories) and acts like a natural shock absorber, helping to protect our bones and organs.



While it's important to eat some fat, it's also important to choose the right type of fat.

Which fats are healthy and which are unhealthy?

Healthy fats (sometimes called unsaturated, polyunsaturated, or monounsaturated fat) help to lower blood cholesterol and triglycerides (types of fat in your body). They also reduce your risk of heart disease, especially if you use them instead of unhealthy fats.

Unhealthy fats (sometimes called saturated fat) can raise blood cholesterol, clog arteries and increase your risk of heart disease.

Healthy fats include fish oil and most plant-based oils (for example olive, canola, soy bean, sunflower, and rice bran). You can find them in:

- nuts and seeds
- avocados
- fish (especially tuna, salmon, sardines, and mackerel).

However, while these are healthy fats, they still provide lots of energy, so it's important not to eat too much of them. We only need small amounts to get benefits from them. One to two tablespoons of a good oil, or some nuts, avocado, salad dressing or mayonnaise is enough for one day.

Unhealthy fats, sometimes called saturated fats, include coconut and palm oil, and most animal fats (such as meat fat, chicken fat, butter, lard, dripping, cream, sour cream, and the fat in full-fat milk, milk products and cheese).

These fats are in many common foods, such as:

- processed meats such as sausages, salami, and canned corned beef



- deep-fried food such as fish and chips
- takeaways such as meat pies and pizza
- cakes, biscuits, and pastries
- coconut cream
- potato chips, high-fat crackers, and creamy dips.

Ways to eat less unhealthy fat

Try to limit how much unhealthy fat you eat. There are some simple ways you can do this:

- choose non-fatty (lean) meat, or remove any visible fat from meat before you cook it
- take the skin off chicken after you've cooked it
- use plant-based spreads and oils instead of butter (you can bake with them as well)
- switch to lower-fat milk (green, yellow, or light blue top) and reduced-fat cheese, such as edam and noble
- use small amounts of lite or reduced-fat coconut milk instead of coconut cream
- choose healthier takeaway options, such as sushi, or kebabs and wraps with plenty of salad
- avoid deep-fried food and processed meats.

There have recently been quite a few articles in newspapers and magazines suggesting that saturated fats (such as butter) and coconut oil are not all that bad for us, and could actually be good for us. However, the evidence doesn't support this and the Ministry of Health does not recommend using these fats. Instead, it recommends we use plant-based oils and spreads.

The Heart Foundation has good articles explaining whether butter is good for you, and whether coconut oil is good for you.

Written by nutrition student, Ara Institute of Canterbury. Adapted by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed October 2018.