

# NUTRITION



## FACT SHEET

### Dietary Fats: Clarifying an Age-Old Issue

Which is healthier—butter, margarine or vegetable oil? What is *trans* fat and why is it bad for me? Is it better for my heart to replace butter with margarine? Should I try to cut out fats?

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend keeping total fat between 20 – 35 percent of our total calories. Most of these fats should come from sources of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats such as fish, nuts, and vegetable oils. On the other hand, intake of saturated and *trans* fat should be limited. Saturated fat should be kept to less than 10 percent of total calories and *trans* fat kept as low as possible. Today, the majority of Americans consume too much saturated and *trans* fat. Most of the fats you eat should be polyunsaturated and monounsaturated.

Why is this important? Consider these facts:

**Fact 1:** Every 45 seconds someone has a heart attack.

**Fact 2:** High blood cholesterol levels are a major risk for heart attacks and can be reduced by making wise dietary fat choices.

**Fact 3:** Research suggests that choosing margarine in place of butter can reduce the risk of heart disease by 10 percent.

#### **Margarine and butter—the difference is what's inside**

Butter is high in both saturated fat and cholesterol. Too much saturated fat in the diet has been shown to raise total blood cholesterol and LDL-cholesterol (bad cholesterol), which can lead to an increased risk of heart disease.

Margarines or spreads, on the other hand, are made from a blend of healthy oils like soybean,

canola and sunflower. These vegetable oils are low in saturated fats, contain no cholesterol and are rich in polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. Margarine and spreads are usually low in saturated fat, however some may contain *trans* fat. Check the Nutrition Facts panel on the label.

#### **What makes these fats a good choice?**

Generally speaking, fats rich in saturated and *trans* fats have been shown to be harmful to health, while research shows that fats and oils rich in polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats are beneficial to health. Saturated fats and *trans* fats are known to raise blood cholesterol, which can increase the risk of heart disease.

Replacing saturated fat in the diet with polyunsaturated fats has been found to reduce LDL cholesterol levels and clinical trials show that substituting polyunsaturated fats for saturated fat reduces risk for heart disease. In addition, consuming omega-3 polyunsaturated fats from fatty fish (such as salmon or trout) or vegetable oils (such as canola, walnut or flaxseed oil) may also help reduce the risk of heart disease.

Monounsaturated fats are the primary fat in olive, canola, and peanut oils, as well as nuts. Research indicates that monounsaturated fat may be useful in controlling blood sugar levels and have a mild

The contents of this fact sheet have been reviewed by the American Dietetic Association's Fact Sheet Review Board. The appearance of this information does not constitute an endorsement by ADA of the sponsor's products or services. This fact sheet was prepared for the general public. Questions regarding its content and use should be directed to a registered dietitian.

## Dietary Fats: Clarifying an Age-Old Issue (continued)

cholesterol lowering effect when substituted for saturated fat.

Within the category of polyunsaturated fats, linoleic acid and alpha-linolenic acid (from the omega-6 and omega 3 families respectively) are essential dietary components since they cannot be produced by the body.

### To Make Heart Healthy Choices Read the Nutrition Facts Panel

*Trans* fat is naturally present in meat and dairy products. However, the main sources of *trans* fat in the U.S. diet are from partially hydrogenated (hardened) oils found in foods such as cookies, crackers, pastries and fried foods. These fats are added for taste, texture and to maintain freshness.

The main concern with *trans* fat is that it raises the risk of coronary heart disease by increasing LDL-cholesterol (bad cholesterol) and lowering HDL-cholesterol (good cholesterol).

Partially hydrogenated oils and tropical oils give margarine its firmness and spreadability. While tropical oil such as palm oil increases the saturated fat content of the product, only a very small amount is necessary to provide the right texture. The amount per serving varies among brands. It is important to consider the total saturated fat plus *trans* fat in a food item. Choose foods low in saturated fats, *trans* fats and cholesterol to help reduce the risk of heart disease.

### Take-Home Message:

To maintain heart health, the best choice is to reduce both saturated and *trans* fat by replacing butter, lard, shortening and hard stick margarine with unsaturated fats such as soft, non-hydrogenated margarine and vegetable oils like olive, canola, sunflower and soybean oils. Read the ingredient list and look closely for these healthy oils.

Enjoy a variety of foods that contain polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats while selecting those that are low in saturated fat and have no *trans* fat.

### KEY DIETARY FAT RECOMMENDATIONS

From the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005*

- Consume less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fats and less than 300 mg/day of cholesterol, and keep *trans* fat consumption as low as possible.
- Keep total fat intake between 20 to 35 percent of calories for adults, between 25-35 percent of calories for children and adolescents, and between 30 to 35 percent of calories for children 2 to 3 years of age, with most fats coming from sources of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats, such as fish, nuts and vegetable oils.
- When selecting and preparing meat, poultry, dry beans, and milk or milk products, make choices that are lean, low-fat or fat-free.
- Limit intake of fats and oils high in saturated and/or *trans* fats, and choose products low in such fats and oils.
- For more information about choosing the foods and amounts that are right for you go to [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov).

For a referral to a registered dietitian and for additional food and nutrition information visit  
**WWW.EATRIGHT.ORG**

What's your most valuable source of good nutrition?  
Registered Dietitians are the experts when it comes to helping people eat well and stay healthy. An RD has the knowledge and expertise to develop an eating plan to meet the needs of all individuals.

 **American Dietetic Association**

[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org) | Your link to nutrition and health<sup>SM</sup>

This Nutrition Fact Sheet has been sponsored by



For recipes and information, visit  
[www.promiseinstitute.org](http://www.promiseinstitute.org)