The Skinny on Eating Fats

Q: Is it OK for me to eat some fat, what kind, and how much?

A: Yes, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) says it's fine to eat some fats. But it's recommended that you try to reduce your intake of solid fats, and instead use liquid oils, such as olive oil and canola oil, where possible.

Although fats generally have a bad reputation, your body actually needs some fats---for energy, for healthy organs, skin, and hair. Fats also help your body absorb vitamins A, D, E, and K. Fats also provide you with essential fatty acids, which your body can't make on its own.

But certain fats can create problems. Fat contains more than twice as many calories as protein or carbohydrates. Eating too many high-fat foods will add excess calories—which leads to weight gain—and excess weight increases your risk of Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and other health problems.

Not all fats are created equal. Some fats are healthier than others. Whenever possible, use products with polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. "Better fats" include vegetable oils that are plant-based, such as soybean, corn, canola, olive, safflower, and sunflower oils. Oils are just fats that are liquid at room temperature, like the vegetable oils used in cooking.

You can also find polyunsaturated fat in nuts, seeds, and fish. Walnuts, flaxseed and salmon are examples of foods with polyunsaturated fat. The target is to limit total fats to no more than 35% of your daily calories. For instance, if you eat and drink 2,000 calories daily, no more than 700 of your calories should be from fats.

As for "bad fats," you should limit the amount of saturated fats and *trans* fats you consume. Both of these fats can put you at greater risk for heart disease. You can read the "Nutrition Facts" label on most packaged food to see the amount and types of fat contained in a single serving.

The Nutrition Label also will list the number of calories from fat in a serving of packaged foods. For example, a quarter cup serving of whole almonds contains 15 grams of fat, including 1 gram of saturated fat. On the Nutrition Label is a "% of Daily Value" column, which is based on a 2,000 calorie per day diet. This diet recommends a daily intake of less than 65 grams of fat, of which less than 20 grams should be from saturated fat. The label says one-quarter cup of almonds has 1 gram of saturated fat, which is 5% of the 20 grams of saturated fat recommended daily. One tablespoon of olive oil has 2 grams of saturated fat, twice the saturated fat found in one tablespoon of canola oil. One cup of whole milk has 5 grams of saturated fat.

The Food & Drug Administration is currently updating the Nutrition Facts label. The "calories from fat" listing will no longer be found on the label. "We know that the type of fat is more important than the total amount of fat," an FDA spokesman said. "Total, saturated and *trans* fat will still be required." For people with cardiovascular issues, foods lower in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol and sodium are best.

Saturated fats are found in red meat, milk products including butter, and palm and coconut oils. Common sources of saturated fat in meals include regular cheese, pizza, grain-based desserts like cookies, cakes, and donuts, and dairy desserts, such as ice cream. Guidelines suggest consuming less than 10% of calories from saturated fats.

It's best to eat a mix of nutrient-dense foods every day. Nutrient-dense foods are foods that have a lot of nutrients but relatively few calories. Choose foods that contain vitamins, minerals, complex carbohydrates, lean protein, and healthy fats. At the same time, try to avoid "empty calories" -- foods and drinks that are high in calories but provide few or no nutrients.

Whatever your age, you can start making positive lifestyle changes today. Eating well can help you stay healthy and independent -- and look and feel good -- in the years to come.

For more tips about healthy eating as you get older, go to the NIH SeniorHealth website: http://nihseniorhealth.gov/eatingwellasyougetolder/faq/faqlist.html#a30