



# Current Perspective on Understanding Fat

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Keeping up with the latest scientific findings on dietary fat can be slippery business. If you're like many Canadians, you're interested—but confused—about the role of fat in a healthy diet. The scientific research in this area is complex and continues to evolve, making it a challenge to translate into a clear message. Read on for the current perspective!

## Fat is not all bad

Chances are you've heard the message to eat less fat. People often take this to mean that all fat is "bad". It's true that a diet low in saturated fat and trans fat can help reduce the risk of heart disease.

But did you know that we need to eat some fat for good health? Fat is a source of essential fatty acids (omega-3 and omega-6) that we must get through food because our bodies can't make them. Fat also is needed to help our bodies absorb the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K. And fat provides food energy, and makes food palatable.

The healthier fats contain polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids. These are found in vegetable oils (such as canola, soybean and olive oil), soft non-hydrogenated margarines, nuts, seeds, avocados, olives and fatty fish.

### Foods are classed by their main type of fatty acids

- Fats containing a high proportion of saturated fatty acids are solid at room temperature. These are usually derived from animal sources (such as lard, suet, and butter) as well as from palm and coconut fats.
- Most plant fats are high in either monounsaturated or polyunsaturated fatty acids.

### The goal is to:

- Limit your total fat intake
- Reduce your intake of saturated and trans fatty acids
- Choose foods containing mostly polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids

Keep in mind that there are different types of fat and too much of any kind isn't recommended. Reduce your intake of saturated and trans fats, and don't go overboard on including some of the "healthier" fats.

## Debunking the myths

CCFN's 2006 [Tracking Nutrition Trends \(TNT\) survey](#) confirmed that Canadians are confused about dietary fat. Here are some findings, along with the facts.

### Cholesterol

Canadians have gaps in their knowledge about the role of diet and their blood cholesterol level (a risk factor for heart disease).

- Nearly three-quarters (72%) believed that "the amount of cholesterol people eat is the major factor that affects their blood cholesterol."
- 86% agreed that "reducing fat in the diet can lower cholesterol in the blood."

### The facts on diet and blood cholesterol:

- For most individuals, dietary cholesterol has little effect on blood cholesterol levels.
- Reducing total fat without reducing saturated fat has little effect on blood cholesterol levels.
- The best nutrition-related way to control blood cholesterol is to:
  - Eat a healthy diet that is low in fat, especially saturated and trans fats.
  - Include polyunsaturated fats (found mainly in vegetable oils, seeds, nuts and fatty fish) and monounsaturated fats (found in high amounts in canola, olive and peanut oils, and avocados).



### Butter and margarine

Canadians are confused about the distinctions between butter and the various types of margarine.

- Half (52%) agreed with the statement “non-hydrogenated or soft margarine contains less fat than butter.”
- One-fifth (19%) agreed that “hard stick margarine is better for you than soft margarine;” even more (26%) were uncertain and answered “don’t know.”

#### The facts on butter and margarine:

- Regular butter and margarine (both stick margarine and soft margarine) have about the same amount of total fat.
- Butter is mainly saturated fat while hard stick margarine is high in trans fat.
- Light or diet butter and margarine have less total fat and calories than regular butter and margarine.
- Soft, non-hydrogenated margarine is the healthiest choice:
  - Soft margarine is highest in unsaturated fats.
  - Hard stick margarine contains more saturated and trans fats.
  - Butter contains more saturated fats.

### Trans fats

Awareness about trans fats doesn’t seem to have increased over the past few TNT survey waves.

- An equal number agreed (34%) and disagreed (33%) that “trans fatty acids have the same effect as saturated fat.”
- An additional third was uncertain: 21% “don’t know” whether these fats have the same effect, and an additional 11% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

#### The facts on trans fat:

- Both trans fats and saturated fats can raise our chances of developing heart disease.
- However, trans fats are more harmful than saturated fats.
  - Both trans and saturated fats raise the “bad” LDL (low density lipoprotein) blood cholesterol.
  - Trans fats also lower the “good” HDL (high density lipoprotein) blood cholesterol.
- Trans fats often are found in cookies, crackers, donuts, muffins, snack foods like potato chips, fried foods, and foods which have the ingredients “vegetable oil shortening” or “partially hydrogenated vegetable oil.”
- Food industry is expected to reduce the trans fat content of retail and restaurant foods to 5% or less of total fat content by 2009—as recommended by Canada’s [Trans Fat Task Force](#).

### Omega-3 fats

The TNT findings on omega-3 fats are more positive—consumer interest appears to have kept pace with the evolving scientific research.

- 80% agreed with the general statement “omega-3 fatty acids are essential to a healthy diet.”
- Only 9% were not aware that omega-3 fats are needed in a healthy diet.

#### The facts on omega-3 fats:

- We need to get omega-3 fats from our diet.
  - Alpha-linolenic acid is an omega-3 fat that is “essential” and cannot be made by the body. It’s found in fish, flaxseed, walnuts, and vegetable oils such as canola, olive, and soybean.
  - Other types of omega-3 fats are made in only small amounts by the body. These are the long-chain types called EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), which are found mainly in fish and fish oils.
- For good health, we need to balance our intake of omega-3 and omega-6, the two types of polyunsaturated fatty acids. Western diets generally are rich in omega-6 fats (which we get mainly from polyunsaturated margarines and vegetable oils such as sunflower, corn and sesame oil), but too low in omega-3 fats.
- The long-chain omega-3 fats are known to reduce the risk of heart disease.
- Researchers are investigating the role of omega-3 fats in neurological function and their importance in inflammatory and immune disorders.

### Where to learn more

Fat, cholesterol and heart disease:

- [Dietary fat—the good, the bad and the ugly](#), by Dietitians of Canada
- [Dietary Fat and Cholesterol](#), by Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada

Trans fat:

- [Current Perspective on Trans Fat](#), by Canadian Council of Food and Nutrition
- [It’s Your Health: Trans Fat](#), by Health Canada (includes information on trans fat, and links to the Trans Fat Task Force report and trans fat monitoring data)

Reading nutrition labels:

- [It’s Your Health: Nutrition Labelling](#), by Health Canada
- [Interactive Nutrition Label and Quiz](#), by Health Canada
- [Healthy Eating is in Store For You](#), a nutrition labelling education centre, by Canadian Diabetes Association and Dietitians of Canada



### The bottom line

Follow the advice from [Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide](#).

### Go for less fat overall:

- ✓ Include plenty of vegetables and fruit, whole grains, and meat alternatives (such as beans, lentils, and tofu).
- ✓ Choose lean meats.
- ✓ Have skim, 1% or 2% milk each day. Choose lower fat yogurt, cheese and sour cream.
- ✓ Limit butter, hard stick margarine, lard, and shortening.
- ✓ Prepare foods with little or no added fat.
- ✓ Use lower fat cooking methods such as baking, broiling or steaming, and try to avoid fried food.

#### What about young kids?

Young children have small appetites yet they need to get enough calories for growth and development. They need the food energy that comes from a balanced diet including fat.

- You can offer them some of the same lower fat foods that other family members might eat.

BUT

- Don't restrict nutritious foods, such as milk or peanut butter, because of the fat content.

### Include healthy fats:

- ✓ Enjoy a variety of foods that contain fat as part of your total daily intake.
- ✓ Include a small amount—30 to 45 mL (2 to 3 Tbsp)—of unsaturated fat each day, including vegetable oils used for cooking, salad dressings, soft margarine and mayonnaise.
- ✓ Have at least two Food Guide Servings (150 grams) of fish each week. Choose fatty fish that's high in omega-3 fats, such as char, herring, mackerel, salmon, sardines and trout.
- ✓ Include other foods that have the healthier types of fats, like nuts (such as walnuts), seeds (such as flaxseed), olives, and avocados. Consider foods enriched with omega-3 fat.

### Read food labels:

- ✓ Look at the Nutrition Facts to find foods that contain less saturated and trans fat.
- ✓ Select lower fat milk alternatives. Compare the Nutrition Facts on cheese, yogurt and sour cream to make wise choices.
- ✓ Check the ingredient list on margarines and other food products. Avoid buying products that have “partially hydrogenated vegetable oil” or “vegetable oil shortening” as these will contain trans fats.
- ✓ Remember the big picture. Low fat doesn't mean “eat as much as you want.” Eating the right amount of food is still important.

Nutrition Facts		
Per 125mL (87g)		
Amount	% Daily Value	
Calories 80		
Fat 0.5 g		1%
Saturated 0 g + Trans 0 g		0%
Cholesterol 0 mg		
Sodium 0 mg		0%
Carbohydrate 18 g		6%
Fibre 2 g		8%
Sugars 2 g		
Protein 3 g		
Vitamin A 2%	Vitamin C	10%
Calcium 0%	Iron	2%

By following these straightforward tips, you'll be right in line with the latest scientific research on dietary fat and health!

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