Healthy Fats for a Healthy Heart: Why Fat is an Essential component of a balanced diet

Fats have gotten a bad rap these days. Many of those who want to achieve a healthier weight, clean up their diet, or lower cholesterol levels may consider cutting out dietary fat as the first step. And who could blame you? It’s been drilled into us for years that if you eat fat, you’ll be fat. However, dietary fat is actually essential to our health—it plays a critical role in almost every function of your body’s metabolism.

Decoding Healthy vs. Unhealthy fats:
The type of fat that you eat is just as important, if not more so, than the amount of fat. In fact, many fat sources may actually improve heart health, support healthy immune function, and help food to be more satisfying, making it less likely you will overeat at your next meal. Fats falls into three general categories: unsaturated fat, saturated fat and trans fats.

Unsaturated Fat “The good guys”
Unsaturated fats include both monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats. Both types lower disease risk, improve cholesterol levels and have anti-inflammatory properties. Unsaturated fats are found in nuts and seeds, plant oils, avocado, soymilk and fatty fish. Omega-3 fatty acids (found in walnuts, canola oil and fatty fish) is a type of polyunsaturated fat well-known for its anti-inflammatory properties. Omega-3s have been found to lower blood pressure and heart rate, lower triglycerides and prevent the development of atherosclerosis.

Saturated Fat and Trans Fats “The bad guys”
Saturated fats are found in animal products such as meat and poultry skin, as well as high fat dairy products and butter. These items should be eaten sparingly, as they have been linked to increasing total cholesterol and LDL (bad) cholesterol levels and may increase your risk of developing type 2 Diabetes. Trans fats are artificially processed fats that are often listed on food labels as “partially hydrogenated oils” and are found in packaged/processed foods, fried foods and stick margarine. Saturated fats and trans fats tend to be solid at room temperature as opposed to liquid mono or polyunsaturated fats like olive oil or canola oils. Trans fats in particular, have been found to be the most dangerous category of fat in terms of its effect on raising cholesterol, increasing inflammation in the body and causing plaque buildup in arteries. The risk of heart attack can be 70-80% higher among those with HIV/AIDS, meaning a habitual high intake of saturated fat and trans fats is that much more dangerous to your heart health.

How to get more healthy fat into your diet
It is recommended that total fat intake should make up about 20-30% of daily calories, mostly from mono and polyunsaturated sources. Less than 10% of total daily calories should come from saturated fats. Trans fats should consist of less than 1% of daily caloric intake or avoided completely.

Here are some tips for incorporating healthy fats into your diet:
- Sub chopped walnuts and/or almonds for salad croutons to add crunch and flavor.
- Keep a small handful of mixed nuts in a Ziploc bag for a filling on-the-go snack.
- Swap out mayo for mashed avocado or guacamole as a sandwich spread.
- Use plant oils such as olive oil, instead of butter when cooking, but make sure to watch how much you pour—just 1 tbsp is 120 calories.
- Eat a fatty fish such as salmon, herring or mackerel once a week.
- Use soymilk instead of cream or half and half in your morning coffee.

Good Sources of Fat:
- Olive oil
- Canola oil
- Sesame oil
- Peanut oil
- Avocado
- Olives
- Peanut Butter
- Nuts
- Polyunsaturated Fats:
- Soybean oil
- Corn oil
- Walnuts
- Sunflower, sesame or pumpkin seeds
- Flaxseed
- Fatty fish (salmon, tuna, mackerel, herring, trout, sardines)
- Soymilk
- Tofu

Bad Sources of Fat:
- Trans fat:
  - Commercially baked goods/pastries, cakes and pizza dough
  - Packaged snack foods (crackers, chips)
  - Vegetable shortening
  - Stick margarine
  - Fried food
  - Candy
- Saturated Fat:
  - High fat cuts of meat
  - Whole fat milk and cream
  - Butter/Lard
  - Cheese
  - Ice cream
  - Palm and coconut oil
Vegetable of the Quarter: Carrots

Carrots are in season locally during the spring and fall months. Their orange hue comes from beta-carotene, an antioxidant that is converted to vitamin A during digestion. Did you know that one medium carrot contains over 200% of the recommended daily intake of vitamin A for the average adult! Carrots also provide fiber, vitamin C, iron and calcium, among many other vitamins and minerals. While carrots are best known for improving eyesight, studies have shown carrots to be protective against a variety of cancers as well. Studies show that the antioxidants and phytochemicals in carrots may also improve immunity, help with blood sugar control and delay aging.

Selection tips: Choose carrots that are firm, blemish-free and unbroken. If the green tops are still attached, they should not be wilted. Check your local farmer’s market for multicolored carrots in hues of purple, yellow and red for an additional dose of antioxidants and flavor!

Storage tips: Place carrots in the coldest part of your refrigerator in a sealed plastic bag. If the green top of the carrots are still attached, remove these before storing, as they can draw out moisture and nutrients from the roots.

Cooking with carrots:
These orange-hued root veggies are a versatile bunch! Carrots are delicious raw or cooked. Try chopped carrots in soups, stews or stir fries. Roasting carrots enhances their natural sweetness and makes a scrumptious side dish. Raw carrots can be used grated or chopped as a salad topper or on their own with your favorite bean dip or peanut butter.

Herb of the Quarter: Cilantro

The cilantro plant, also known as coriander, is used both as an herb and a spice, as its leaves and seeds are both used for seasoning. Native to the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean regions, cilantro is one of the world’s oldest spices, with a history dating back to 5,000 BC!

Fresh cilantro has been extensively researched for a wide variety of benefits and studies demonstrate it may help lower inflammation, reduce cholesterol, and improve insulin sensitivity and blood sugar control in diabetics. Additionally, cilantro contains strong antibacterial properties that help combat Salmonella!

Fresh cilantro has a peppery, citrusy flavor profile and smells faintly of licorice. Cilantro is a well-known ingredient in salsas, but it can also add zest to soup, salads, pasta and many other savory dishes. Cilantro also makes a great addition to pesto or marinades. When purchasing cilantro, look for vibrant, green leaves that are free of brown spots and firm stalks. Store cilantro in a damp paper towel in the refrigerator to maintain freshness and make sure to use these herbs soon after purchasing, as the delicate leaves lose nutrients the longer they sit.