# Everything you with knew about



### is wrong

It's been demonised for decades but as it turns out, fat – even the saturated kind – is not all bad for you. Here are seven facts you should know about the fat in your diet.

BY SASHA GONZALES



n an effort to live a healthy lifestyle, many of us choose to limit the amount of fat we consume. We trim meat of all visible fat before cooking it, we make a conscious decision not to drizzle oil on our salad, and we stick to non- or low-fat everything, from yogurt and cheese to cereal and baked goods.

But many nutrition experts believe we are taking our obsession with fat a little too far. Fat has gotten such a bad rep over the years that we've come to look at it as the enemy. Out of the fear that we will gain weight and damage our arteries, we've given it - even the good varieties - the heave-ho.

Unfortunately, much of what we know about fat is not all accurate, and as a result, we have formed dietary habits that are doing our bodies more harm than good. For instance, if we are not avoiding fat totally, we are consuming the wrong kinds or else misusing them in cooking.

To make better decisions about the type and amount of fat we should eat, it's important to know what we've been getting wrong all along.

Some fats are worse than others, says Jaclyn Reutens, clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants. Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are the better ones, and these include plant-based fats found in olive oil, avocado, nuts, seeds, soya beans and fatty fish.

On the other hand, saturated fats, such as those found in full-fat dairy products (milk, cheese and yogurt), butter, palm oil, beef and pork fat, as well as chicken skin, are associated with more health problems. Jaclyn explains that an excess consumption of saturated fats will increase your levels of low-density lipo-protein (LDL) or bad cholesterol in the body.

More harmful than saturated fats, however, are trans fats from plant oils that have gone through the process of hydrogenation. Sources include hard margarine as well as refined vegetable oils like canola, peanut and rapeseed, vegetable shortening, and baked or commercially processed foods such as pastries, potato chips and even pizza crust.

Excess trans fats not only increase LDL cholesterol but also decrease your high-density lipo-protein (HDL) or good cholesterol levels, says Jaclyn.

Nutrition experts say it's okay to enjoy good fats, but remember that, although they are deemed healthier, they still contain nine calories per gram, which means an excessive intake can put you at risk of becoming overweight.

### T EATING ENOUGH

"Thirty per cent of your diet should be made up of good fats, but you may be surprised to know that most of us are not even getting half of that," says Pooja Vig, nutritional therapist and founder of The Nutrition Clinic.

"After 1984, the focus was on going for low fat. But when we removed fat from our diets, we started eating a lot of carbohydrates in its place to feel satiated. In fact, there is a lot of data showing that there was an increase in weight gain, heart disease, depression and diabetes when communities reduced their fat consumption."

Of course, this doesn't mean that you should load up on high-fat foods. Pooja recommends going for the good fats, and avoiding trans fats as well as refined

vegetable oils.

"We can't deny that the modern diet, with its packaged and processed foods, is high in fat, but we have been taught to believe that all fat is bad. And this simply is not true."▶

#### 3) SATURATED FAT MAY NOT BE TO BLAME FOR HEART DISEASE

A controlled-diet study, carried out by researchers at the Ohio State University in the US and published in the journal Plos One in November 2014, found that doubling or even nearly tripling saturated fat in the diet does not increase saturated fat in the blood. As we know, increased levels of saturated fat in the blood tend to raise one's risk of heart disease.

When the subjects' saturated fat intake was increased and their carbohydrate intake simultaneously reduced, the saturated fat in their blood did not go up. In fact, it went down in some people. But when their carbohydrate intake was progressively increased and their saturated fat intake reduced, researchers detected higher levels of the fatty acid palmitoleic acid in their blood. Palmitoleic acid is associated with the unhealthy metabolism of carbohydrates that can promote disease.

However, Lauren Ho, dietitian at the Singapore Heart Foundation, says that just because recent studies have shown that people who ate more saturated fat did not have a higher risk for heart disease than those who ate less, it doesn't mean that you should go overboard with the fatty meats and butter.

"More studies are needed to establish the link between saturated fat and heart disease," explains Lauren. "Some researchers suggest that saturated fat raises a subtype of LDL with large, fluffy particles that is benign, rather than the smaller and denser LDL particles that are more harmful. Nevertheless, most dietitians and doctors would prudently advise you to limit your intake of saturated and trans fats."

She adds: "While saturated fat is still a contentious subject, experts all agree that the biggest culprit is trans fat, as well as a diet that is high in added sugars and refined carbohydrates. So, you can still eat foods like butter or coconut milk, but in small amounts. The Singapore Dietary Guidelines 2003 recommends that your saturated fat intake should comprise less than 10 per cent of your total daily calories."

#### FOR A HEALTHY MIND AND BODY

Think you're doing yourself a favour by omitting fat from your diet? Think again, Fat has many important functions in the body.

According to Jaclyn, dietary fat is a carrier for fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K, "Each plays an important biological role in the body.



#### \*\*TOO LITTLE FAT CAN CONTRIBUTE TO DEPRESSION AND AN INCREASED RISK OF CANCER AND HEART DISEASE.

POOJA VIG OF THE NUTRITION CLINIC

and a deficiency of any of them may result in conditions such as brittle bones as well as dry skin and mucous membranes."

In addition to being a concentrated source of energy, fat also helps protect our organs - including the liver, heart, pancreas and kidneys - from shock by acting as a type of cushion. Plus, it keeps us warm in cold weather, and plays a role in cellular signalling, too.

Adds Pooja: "On a more serious level, too little fat can contribute to depression and an increased risk of cancer and heart disease. If you are not eating between two and three portions of oily fish a week, I suggest supplementing your diet with a good quality EPA-DHA supplement. If you are not getting enough fat, you may notice that you have stiff joints, bumps on the back of your arms, dry or flaky skin, and brittle nails."

How much fat do we need exactly? For good health, according to the Singapore Dietary Guidelines 2003, we are to limit our total daily fat intake to 25 to 30 per cent of our total calorie intake, of which less than 10 per cent is from saturated fat. For an average adult daily calorie intake of 2,000 calories. the total fat and saturated allowances are 56g to 67g per day, and less than 22g per day respectively.

See a dietitian for more tailored advice, as women with sedentary lifestyles may have a lower recommended daily calorie intake.

#### FATS CAN AFFECT THEIR NITRITIONAL CONTENT

Shallow-frying your food in extra virgin olive oil is not the right way to reap this fat's health benefits. In fact, by heating the oil at a high temperature, you are stripping it of its goodness.

"Even good oils have different properties and smoking points, so in order to get the most out of them, it's important to use them correctly," says Pooja, "When some oils reach smoking point, they start to break down and release free radicals which can damage healthy cells".

For salad dressings and light sauteing, go for olive oil instead of refined oil. For mid-heat cooking, choose macadamia nut oil or avocado oil. For high-heat cooking, try coconut oil or organic ghee (clarified butter), recommends Pooja.

When storing unrefined coconut oil, keep it away from heat and light to preserve its nutritional integrity and prevent it from becoming rancid, says Susie Rucker, a nutritional therapist at Body With Soul. "A good way to store it is in a dark glass container in the cupboard. If you don't cook with coconut oil very often, you can store yours in the fridge or even freeze it."

### HIGH-FAT DAIRY

Research from Sweden, which was presented at the annual European Association for the Study of Diabetes (EASD) meeting in 2014, revealed that people who had eight or more portions of high-fat dairy products per day had a 23 per cent lower risk of getting type 2 diabetes than those who had one or fewer portions per day. The results are contrary to what we have been told all along - that eating high-fat foods can increase our risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

Much like what other studies have shown. the researchers discovered that different sources of fat in the diet affect the risk of type 2 diabetes in different ways. However, more research is still needed, and experts have warned that this does not give us licence to load up on full-fat milk, yogurt and cheese, thinking that it will help protect us against the disease.

An excess consumption of high-fat dairy products can lead to weight gain, which puts people at risk of developing type 2 diabetes to begin with, along with a sedentary lifestyle. As with all other types of saturated fat, moderation is key, and high-fat dairy products should be consumed as part of a balanced diet.

"Focusing on what should be included in a diet or what is good for our health is more important than focusing on what should be avoided," says Jackie Green, dietitian of The Family Dietitian at Osteopathy & Podiatry Centre. "The sooner we take our focus away from fat, sugar or dairy, or whatever the demon of the time is, the better off we will be."



## (7) EATING ANIMAL (7) FAT AND HIGH-FAT DAIRY PRODUCTS IS FINE IN MODERATION

If you want that piece of fatty grassfed beef, go ahead and have it, says Jackie. "I am not against eating these foods in small quantities, as long as they are part of a healthy and balanced diet," she explains.

"Coconut oil is high in saturated fat, but if a recipe calls for a small amount of cold-pressed coconut oil, then use it. The same applies to butter. If taste is important then use a bit."

If you're not eating fat in processed foods, then whatever fat or oil you choose should be consumed in moderation. It's fine to have a variety, just keep the quantity modest. Jackie goes on to remind us that all fats are a concentrated source of calories, which can ultimately lead to weight gain.

"Being overweight is the biggest cause of chronic health conditions worldwide, from certain cancers, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease to even Alzheimer's disease."

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