

Q. I am trying to lose weight, how much fat should I be eating?

A. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend getting between 20-35% of your total calories from fat. Based on a 2,000 calorie diet that is 45-75 grams of fat per day. This fat should come mostly from healthy sources such as fish, nuts, and vegetable oils while avoiding unhealthy sources like chips, cookies, candy, and fried foods. To lose weight you do not need to restrict your fat intake below 20% of your total calories, you can include healthy fats in amounts suggested by the dietary guidelines. Keep in mind that to lose weight you need to eat less total calories and become more physically active.

Q. I know there is a difference between different types of fats; could you explain to me what they are?

A. Healthy fats are unsaturated fats. There are two types of unsaturated fats, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. Polyunsaturated fats are found in vegetable oils such as sunflower, corn, soybean, and flaxseed oils, as well as walnuts, flax seeds, and fish. Omega-3's are also a polyunsaturated fat that provides many health benefits. Monounsaturated fats are found in canola, peanut, and olive oils as well as many nuts and seeds. Both types of unsaturated fats can help improve your blood cholesterol levels. Saturated and trans fats are the unhealthy fats that do the opposite, they can have an unhealthy impact on cholesterol levels and increase your risk for heart disease. Some fast food and fried foods, cakes, cookies, chips, pies, and candy contain trans and saturated fats. Meat, whole-milk dairy products, coconut and palm oil contain saturated fats. The best way to get the healthy type of fat is to eat a diet rich in whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy, nuts, and lean meats.

Q. I have been hearing about trans fats lately, what do I need to know about it?

A. Trans fats are one of the unhealthy types of fat that can increase your risk for heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends getting no more than 2 grams of trans fat per day. Trans fats are formed when oil is partially hydrogenated to increase stability when cooking. Foods that sometimes contain trans fats are chips, cookies, crackers, french fries, and other baked goods. Limit your intake of trans fats by choosing mostly fresh foods like fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy and lean meat. When you eat out, ask to make sure that the restaurant uses only zero trans fat oils. You should also read food labels and avoid purchasing items that contain trans fats. Be aware that even products that claim to be "trans fat free" can have up to 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving. If you are not careful that little amount of trans fat can add up to a substantial amount.

Our dietitians receive hundreds of questions each year about a wide variety of nutrition topics. Their timely and trustworthy insights and ideas can help you and your family live healthier lives. Since everyone's health history and nutritional needs are so different, please make sure that you talk with your own doctor and registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.

Q. I have high cholesterol, should I be careful with fat and cholesterol in my diet?

A. Recent studies show that cholesterol levels are affected more by the kinds of fat you eat rather than how much cholesterol you get in your diet. For instance, most healthy people can eat up to one egg (which contains about 200 mg of cholesterol) per day without it substantially affecting their cholesterol levels. Although it is still important to limit foods high in cholesterol, especially if you have heart disease, you should try to avoid foods with trans fats and limit foods high in saturated fat. You should also try to achieve a healthy weight, be physically active, and eat foods that are high in fiber such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Include healthy sources of fats in your diet such as fish, nuts, seeds, and vegetable oils that may actually increase your HDL (good cholesterol) levels.

Q. I enjoy eating out, how can I still make low-fat choices?

A. Many restaurants offer low-fat choices and identify low fat options on the menu. This makes it easier for you to choose the lower fat options. You can also customize your order to make a lower-fat meal when eating out. Choose lean meats like skinless chicken breast or fish that is grilled, broiled, or baked. Ask for your foods to be prepared without extra butter or sauces, or get them on the side. Choose low-fat salad dressings or use a few wedges of lemon for your salad and vegetables. Go for broth-based soups instead of creamier ones, and choose red pasta sauce over white. Choose a grilled chicken sandwich without mayo and get a baked potato, salad, fruit, or carrot sticks instead of fries. If you choose your foods carefully you can eat a lower-fat meal wherever you go.

Q. Are reduced-fat and fat-free foods better for you?

A. Many fat-free foods are just as high in calories and sugar than their “full-fat” counterpart. For example some reduced-fat cookies have 150 calories per serving, 14 grams of sugar, and 4.5 grams of fat. Their regular counterparts have only 10 more calories, 2.5 more grams of fat, and almost the same amount of sugar. People may end up eating more fat and calories overall when they choose reduced-fat because they think they can have larger portions. A good option is to choose foods that are naturally low in fat like whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables and low-fat dairy instead of reduced fat packaged foods. Make those other items an occasional “treat” and focus on proper portions rather than worrying solely about their fat content.

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Q. I am trying to lose weight, is it better to count calories or fat?

A. Weight loss all comes down to calories in, calories out. You need to burn more calories each day than you take in. (about 500 extra calories per day to lose a pound a week) However, each gram of fat contains 9 calories. So if you are eating foods high in fat, you are most likely eating too many calories along with them. To start out you may want to keep a food log and record both calories and fat in the foods you eat. This way you can see if you are getting more than the recommended 20-35% of calories from fat each day. This will also help you see where you are getting most of your fat from. Is it from healthy sources like fish, nuts, avocados, and vegetable oils or is it from unhealthy sources like chips, cookies, and candy? Finding a balance between your calorie needs and getting the right amount of fat is important for losing weight and staying healthy. You should also include regular exercise into your daily routine.

Q. What is cholesterol and can I get too much in my diet?

A. Cholesterol is made by your body but also can be obtained in the diet by eating animal products like meat, eggs, and dairy. Cholesterol is used to make hormones like estrogen and testosterone and helps to build and repair cells. There are two types of cholesterol in the body; LDL and HDL. LDL is the bad cholesterol and too much in your blood can clog your arteries and lead to heart attack and stroke. HDL is the good cholesterol and can help prevent heart disease. Although you want to limit foods high in cholesterol, your cholesterol levels are impacted more by eating foods high in saturated and trans fats. Eating a diet rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy and lean meats can help keep your cholesterol under control and your heart healthy.

Q. Should I avoid foods that are very high in fat like nuts, avocados, and olive oil?

A. It is true that these foods are high in fat but it is mostly polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats which are good for you. These types of fat can provide many health benefits such as keeping your heart healthy but you don't want to overdo it. Enjoy these foods but keep in mind proper portion control and moderation so that you do not get more fat or calories than you need in a day. Other foods that have heart healthy fats include fish, flaxseed, and soymilk.

Q. Why do we need fat in our diets?

A. Fats provide a source of energy, and are necessary for absorbing vitamins like A, D, E, and K. Healthy unsaturated fats like polyunsaturated and monounsaturated play a major role in the diet. Healthy fats have been shown to increase good cholesterol in the body and may help reduce risk for heart disease. You want to make sure you are getting enough of the right kind of fat in your diet for good health.

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