

THE PLANT-BASED LIFESTYLE

What is Fat?

Fats are one of the three macronutrients our bodies need along with carbohydrates and protein. In simple terms, the majority of fats are called triglycerides which are glycerol molecules bonded by fatty acids. Fats are categorized as "saturated" or "unsaturated". Saturated fats have all of their carbons saturated with hydrogen atoms and are solid at room temperature. Unsaturated fats do not have all their carbons bonded to hydrogen atoms and are liquid at room temperature.

You may have heard of omega-3s, omega-6s, and trans fats. What's it all mean? Omega-3s and Omega-6s are essential fatty acids. They are essential because the body cannot make them - only plants can make them.

Trans fats are fats created by adding hydrogen to what would otherwise be a liquid fat so that it becomes a solid. This increases shelf life and stability (an advantage from an industrial food manufacturers standpoint). Most trans fat in the American diet is found in processed foods like crackers, frozen pizzas, microwave popcorn and breakfast sandwiches.



Are Fats Good or Bad?

Perhaps the most confusing and misunderstood of the macronutrients is fat. The answer to the above question is it depends on how much and what type of fat you get. Our bodies need some fat. Fat helps us absorb certain nutrients (think fat soluble vitamins) and produce certain hormones. They protect our organs and keep the body warm as well as providing a source of energy in the absence of glucose. Our brain function depends on fats too. But (and there's always a but!), too much fat, particularly saturated fat, opens you up to a host of issues including cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. In addition, trans fats (see sidebar) have been linked to chronic diseases and in particular, have been found to have a dangerous effect on cholesterol - raising the LDL (bad cholesterol) and lowering HDL (good cholesterol).

Omega-3 fatty acids (see sidebar) are anti-inflammatory and are therefore called "good fats". Omega-6s, while still an essential nutrient, are pro-inflammatory and should be consumed in a roughly 1:1 and up to 3:1 ratio with omega-3s (omega-6:omega-3). Unfortunately, in the standard American diet the typical person consumes them in a ratio anywhere from 16:1 to 50:1.

Start Your Day Right Oatmeal

I start every day the same - with a big bowl of oatmeal topped with lots of colorful berries, and chia and ground flax seeds. Not only do you get your daily dose of healthy fats, but the oats are a complex carb that releases glucose more slowly into your system keeping you supplied with a steady stream of energy for your morning. The colorful berries are loaded with antioxidants to reduce inflammation, destroy rogue cells in your body, and boost your immune system.

1/2 cup rolled oats

1 cup water

1 banana, mashed

1/2 cup berries

1 tablespoon ground flax seeds

1 tablespoon chia seeds

dash of cinnamon

Combine oats and water in a deep cereal bowl and microwave on high 2 minutes (or if you prefer simmer uncovered in a pot on a stovetop about 5 minutes). Top with mashed banana, berries, flax, chia, and a dash of cinnamon. Enjoy!

Resources

Check out these resources if you want to learn more about fats:

- [Cutting fat better for weight loss than cutting carbs.](#)
- [Essential Facts about Fats](#)
- [Is Fish Part of a Healthy Diet?](#)

So what's a person to do? How can you be sure you are getting enough fat, the right type of fat, not too much, and in the correct omega-6 to omega-3 ratio? Is there an app for that? Well, it's actually much easier than you think. Read on.

A diet rich in a wide variety of unprocessed plant foods provides a healthy balance of these fatty acids. But eating too many animal products, including fish, all vegetable oils (yes, even the revered extra virgin olive oil!) and processed foods can all lead to an excess of omega 6s. We recommend chia seeds, ground flax seeds, and hemp seeds as excellent sources of omega-3s and omega-6s, but do be careful with the amount of nuts and seeds consumed since they are very calorie dense. One or two tablespoons a day should suffice.

In addition, the ideal diet rich in plant foods should be comprised of no more than 15% of calories from fat and some sources advocate for less than 10%. A gram of fat (less than a thimble full) has 9 calories so you can see how quickly you can add calories to your diet by consuming fatty foods. That tablespoon of olive oil you might drizzle on your salad or add to your fry pan has 120 calories and virtually no nutrients. You can put your daily food consumption into an app like [myfitnesspal](#) to see how much fat you are actually getting.

Lastly, I want to emphasize that study after study demonstrate the link between our number one killer - heart disease - and saturated fat. Do not believe any source that tells you that saturated fat does not contribute to coronary artery disease. Check out [this article](#) for a more detailed understanding of the role of saturated fat in heart disease.

In an upcoming issue we will tackle the subject of oils and why we don't eat them and how to cook without them. Stay tuned.

If you want to know more, email

alexandra@resolvehealthandfitness.com to learn about our whole-food plant-based education programs, consultations, and meal plans.

