HERE ARE SOME SIMPLE ANSWERS TO TRICKY QUESTIONS ABOUT FATS

BY LISA TURNER
PHOTO BY SCOT PITTS
Our relationship with fat continues to baffle us. We love it, then we hate it. It comforts us, then frightens us. Unlike sugar, which we’ve come to universally vilify, fat makes us sway with indecision.

Meanwhile, conflicting claims abound. Saturated fat clogs our arteries, but coconut oil lowers cholesterol. Canola oil is high in healthful monounsaturated fats, but it’s toxic. Flax is loaded with omega-3 fats, but they’re the wrong kind. Which are real-life facts, and which are big, fat lies? Some answers to the most frequently asked fat questions follow.

Q I know saturated fats are supposed to be bad for me, but what’s the difference between monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, and which are more healthful?

A In chemical terms, monounsaturated fats contain one double bond in their structures, while polyunsaturated fats contain two or more double bonds, making them more “bendy” and prone to damage. Which are more healthful? That depends. Both have similar effects on cholesterol levels, but studies suggest that monounsaturated fats lower the risk for breast cancer, while polyunsaturated fats appear to increase risk.

Additionally, some foods that are high in monounsaturated fats have additional benefits. Olive oil is rich in compounds that have antioxidant properties and anti-inflammatory effects, and many studies have found that almonds are extremely effective at lowering LDL cholesterol while raising HDL levels. Peanuts raise HDL levels, especially in people with diabetes; they’re also rich in resveratrol, which fights inflammation and has heart-protective effects. Other foods rich in monounsaturated fats include avocados, macadamia nuts, and canola oil.

Q I’ve heard that canola oil is harmful; is that just an urban myth?

A Yes and no. The idea that canola oil contains high levels of toxins comes from the fact that it used to be produced from the rapeseed plant, a weed that’s used to make mechanical oils; rapeseed is naturally high in erucic acid, a compound used as a lubricant in industrial processes that’s toxic to humans in high quantities (hence the toxicity rumor). The rapeseed was then crossbred to develop a canola plant that does not contain erucic acid. Canola is named for Canadian oil, the main supplier of the product, since “rape plant” clearly has some marketing issues. The canola plant, not the rapeseed, is now used to make canola oil. All the other stuff about mustard gas and toxic fumes is urban myth.

However, many damning studies have cast suspicion on canola oil. It has been implicated in the formation of lesions in the arteries, and more recent studies noted that canola oil markedly shortened the survival rate of animals. Canola oil originally had a high polyunsaturated fat content. However, in the last few years canola oils have been developed that have a higher monounsaturated content. It’s probably safer to stick with olive oil, which has a vast body of clinical research and historical use, for your monounsaturated fats.
HEALTHY fats

Q: EFA, ALA, EPA, DHA, LA, GLA, AA—I’m confused by this alphabet soup of oils. What do all these letters mean?

A: They all refer to types of polyunsaturated fats. Here’s how it works: omega-3 and omega-6 fats are both referred to as essential fatty acids (EFAs); the body can’t make them, so we have to get them from our diets. The three main omega-3 fatty acids are alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). ALA is found mainly in flax and nuts, DHA and EPA are found mainly in fish. Omega-6 fatty acids include linoleic acid (LA), gamma-linolenic acid (GLA), arachidonic acid (AA), and others.

Q: Can I eat flax instead of fish to get omega-3 fats?

A: Yes and no. Flax, walnuts, and a few other foods contain omega-3s, but they’re in the form of ALA; ALA must be converted into EPA, which is necessary for the production of certain hormones, and DHA, which is required for brain development, vision, and other functions. But the body generally uses ALA for energy, and conversion into EPA and DHA may be limited and inefficient for therapeutic purposes. Conversion efficiency depends on the individual, and varies widely; in most studies, conversion from ALA to EPA/DHA has ranged from 10 percent to 35 percent. What that means for you: if you’re counting on flax and walnuts for your main source of omega-3 fats, take into account the fact that not all of it will be converted; a tablespoon of flaxseed oil is generally recommended.

In addition to flax and walnut, there are two exciting vegetarian EFA options you’ll want to try—chia and salba seeds. Chia seed is an extremely rich source of omega-3s from ALA as well as omega-6 fats. Each offers a multitude of benefits, including digestive health, and are versatile (e.g., can be used in recipes, sprinkled on food).

Q: How many omega-3 fats should I eat every day?

A: The vast body of research on omega-3 fats involves cardiovascular health; most studies suggest that omega-3s help prevent erratic heartbeats, lower blood pressure, improve blood vessel function, and lower triglyceride; at higher doses, omega-3 fats may also reduce chronic inflammation, which plays a role in the development of atherosclerosis. In addition, some research suggests that EPA and DHA from fish may help prevent prostate cancer. Most evidence supports dietary recommendations of 500 mg per day of EPA and DHA for cardiovascular disease prevention—about the equivalent of eating fish twice a week. A couple of points to remember: fish may contain mercury and other toxins, and improper processing and storage can damage the delicate oils, turning them rancid. If you take supplements, buy a high-quality version that’s been stored properly and is tested to be free of contaminants.
gourmet EFAs

Udo Erasmus, a foremost expert on essential fatty acids and the creator of Udo's Oils, makes it easy to get your daily dose of healthy fats with his cookbook Omega 3 Cuisine: Recipes for Health and Pleasure. Fat enhances the flavor of many foods, which is one of the reasons we enjoy eating it so much, says Erasmus. But fat also has many other benefits. According to Erasmus, good fats help:
• Burn body fat
• Improve digestion and reduce cravings for sugar and other carbohydrates
• Enhance the absorption of oil-soluble nutrients into the body
• Increase energy level and lift mood
• Speed healing, increase stamina, and improve focus and performance.

Ready to experience the numerous health advantages of EFAs? Try the following recipe from Omega 3 Cuisine, which offers a complete serving of essential fatty acids. For more recipes, visit omega3cuisine.com.

monounsaturated fats for cooking and eat fish or take an omega-3 supplement.

ATTAIN YOUR IDEAL WEIGHT

“If you’re trying to lose weight, I recommend whole-food nutritional supplements, cod liver oil, and supplements made with concentrated fucoxanthin, a carotenoid from brown seaweed that’s showing tremendous fat-burning potential.”

Jordan S. Rubin, ND, is the founder of Garden of Life and the author of numerous books on health, including The Maker's Diet for Weight Loss.

GARDEN OF LIFE OCEANS 3 BEYOND OMEGA-3 combines EPA and DHA from high-potency fish oil with the antioxidant and anti-inflammatory powers of astaxanthin and fucoxanthin, found naturally in the ocean.

that’s because products that contain less than 0.5 gram trans fats are considered by federal regulatory agencies to be trans fat free. If you see a product that lists “fully hydrogenated oils,” it is free of trans fats; the chemical process of fully, rather than partially, hydrogenating an oil removes the trans fats. The best advice; steer clear of man-made oils, and stick with the ones made by nature.

What about coconut oil? It’s saturated, but it’s supposed to be healthful.

The most compelling information comes from studying traditional tropical cultures; coconut has been a staple food for thousands of years, but the islanders clearly aren’t obese and plagued by many of our modern diseases. In one early study, researchers examined people living on Polynesian islands and found that vascular disease was uncommon, and there was no evidence of their high saturated fat intake having a harmful effect. More recent studies suggest that coconut oil reduces blood cholesterol, and lowers other markers of heart attack risk.

quinoa pilaf Serves 6 to 8

This delicious dish, provides a complete protein, a varied complement of vegetables, and all your essential fatty acids in one shot. The carrot juice adds both color and a wonderful sweetness, but feel free to substitute with vegetable broth, if you prefer. Either way, this is a crowd pleaser.

2 Tbs. extra virgin olive oil
1 large onion, diced
4 stalks celery, diced
1 Tbs. minced garlic
1 green pepper, diced
1 yellow pepper, diced
1 red pepper, diced
2 bunches scallions, sliced
2 zucchini, diced
2 carrots, grated
1 cup quinoa, well washed and drained
2 cups carrot juice
1 tsp. sea salt
¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
½ cup Udo's Oil
¼ cup chopped parsley

1. Heat the olive oil in a large, heavy pot and add the onion, celery, and garlic, stirring constantly. As soon as the mixture heats up, add the peppers and continue stirring. When mixture has heated through (but is not sizzling), add half the scallions, the remaining vegetables, and quinoa. Stir well and then add the carrot juice, salt, and pepper. Bring to a simmer, adjust heat to medium, cover, and cook about 15 minutes, or until the juice has been absorbed and quinoa is tender. Remove from the heat, stir in the remaining scallions, and Udo’s Oil.

2. Serve at once, generously garnished with chopped parsley.

expert prevention tip: dr. rubin

We now know that trans fats, also called hydrogenated fats, raise the risk of heart disease, increase total cholesterol, decrease HDL levels, and are worse for us than saturated fats. But even if you don’t eat Pop-Tarts or fast foods, you may still be getting trans fats. They show up in crackers, microwave popcorn, biscuits, and even instant “international coffee” mixes. (Very small amounts also occur naturally in beef and dairy products.)

Now that trans fats are required to be listed on labels (they weren’t until 2006), you can find out what’s in your food. Anything that says “partially hydrogenated” or “hydrogenated oil” listed on the ingredients contains trans fats. The product may be labeled as “free of trans fats” or “0 grams trans fats,” but...