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Food For Thought: Fats in the diet – what you should know to make healthier choices

Contrary to what you may have been led to believe, everyone needs fats to live. However, you only need about 20 grams of fat per day (the equivalent of one tablespoon of fat). Most of us consume 5 times this much fat each day! Not only do we need to pay attention to total daily fat intake; we also need to be aware that different types of fats have different effects in the body.

Saturated fats are solid at room temperature. Animal fats are highly saturated, as are coconut and palm kernel oils. Evidence for the health risk of saturated fat diets is overwhelming. A high saturated fat diet stimulates the liver to make LDL (bad) cholesterol in greater quantities than you body can remove from the circulation. The result is damage to the cardiovascular system and arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries).

Artificial fats such as margarine, vegetable shortening and partially hydrogenated oils are chemically altered to make them solid at room temperature. These fats contain trans-fatty acids, which are poorly tolerated because we do not have the enzyme tools in our bodies to process them, and the definitely are hazardous to cardiovascular health.

Monounsaturated oils especially olive oil, appear to be the safest of all edible fats. Replacing saturated fats with olive oil can help reduce LDL (bad) cholesterol. In countries that use olive oil as the main dietary fat, there are lower rates of heart disease, cancer and other degenerative diseases.

Essential fatty acids found in ocean fish, flaxseed oil and evening primrose oil promote health and healing. These oils reduce inflammation, protect against blood clotting and other degenerative changes in the body. You can ensure a good supply of these essential oils by eating fresh fish and using flaxseed oil as a food or as a supplement taken in capsules.

Practical changes in consumption of fats that benefit your health

Cut total fat by eliminating deep-fried foods, moderating consumption of chips, nuts and cheese, and learning to modify recipes to reduce the fat

content of favorite dishes. Read labels to determine fat content and try to limit fat intake to no more than 25% of total calories daily.

Make a special effort to cut saturated fat from your diet by cutting down substantially on meat, skinless poultry, whole milk and milk products, butter, margarine, vegetable shortening and all products made with tropical oils or partially hydrogenated oils.

Eliminate polyunsaturated vegetable oil from your diet by avoiding safflower, sunflower, corn, peanut and cottonseed oils and products made from them.

Learn to rely on olive oil as your main dietary fat by using a flavorful brand of cold-pressed extra virgin olive oil.

Learn to identify and avoid all sources of hazardous trans-fatty acids such as margarine, solid vegetable shortening and products made with partially hydrogenated oils of any kind.

Increase your consumption of omega-3 fatty acids by eating ocean fish, flaxseed oil, or using an essential fatty acid supplement in capsule form.