

Saturated Fatty Acids

Dietary fat can influence overall health: not only the total amount of fat eaten, but also the types of fats and oils consumed.

In our series of articles on 'fats' we will outline the facts about fats and detail the current UK intake and consensus recommendations to help you understand these compounds. An article will be devoted to each of the three main types of fats.

The fats and oils in our foods are largely composed of triacylglycerols which are compounds of glycerol and fatty acids. It is the fatty acid component of these compounds that effect the physiological changes within the body which can impact upon long term health.

There are three types of fatty acids commonly found in our foods: saturated fatty acids (SFAs), polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs) and monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFAs). In this article we will focus on SFAs.

Fats that contain a high proportion of saturated fatty acids are solid at room temperature and are usually of animal origin. Dietary sources of saturated fatty acids include: butter, lard and the fat on meat. Coconut and palm fat are unusual plant fats in that they contain a relatively high proportion of saturated fat.

These are unquestionably the less desirable fats and a reduction in dietary intake of saturated fats is a key health message from every reputable health organisation.

Do you know?

Saturated fats are linked with an increased risk of heart disease due to their effect on cholesterol levels. High intakes are associated with an increased overall cholesterol level and in particular the less desirable LDL (low density lipoprotein) cholesterol.

A reduction in serum LDL cholesterol levels in the general population could most effectively be achieved by a reduction of saturated fatty acid consumption.

What the experts say

The Department of Health recommends that saturated fatty acids should contribute no more than 11% of our food energy.

Do you know?

The current UK average daily intakes of saturated fatty acids are 13.2% of food energy for women and 13.4% for men.

These exceed the current recommendations.

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The recommended maximum set by the Department of Health could be viewed as simply a target. The World Health Organisation (WHO) sets the individual lower limit at 0%. That is to say, we can satisfy our fat requirements from healthier sources, such as MUFAs and PUFAs.

Ways to reduce saturated fatty acid intake

Within the UK, organisations such as the British Heart Foundation, Diabetes UK and the Food Standards Agency all advise reducing saturated fatty acid intake. There are many steps an individual can take to reduce their overall intake of saturated fatty acids, these include:

- Trim off and discard the fat when meat is consumed
- Remove and discard the skin when poultry is consumed
- Restrict sausages, pates, meat pies and meat products that are often high in fat
- Eat more non-oily fish
- Choose low fat options for dairy products such as cheese and yoghurt
- Limit the amount of foods high in fat, such as, butters, margarines, spreads and oils
- Limit the amount of fatty treats, such as, crisps, biscuits, cakes

However, as with all aspects of diet, focusing on one specific element can be both misleading and may even progress to faddy eating and further imbalances in the diet. Thus an individual's consumption of saturated fatty acids should be viewed alongside their overall fat intake and, indeed, their entire diet.

Keeping sight of the overall picture is the art of successful nutritional communications.