

Fat Facts About Olive Oil

It may seem remarkable that such a small dietary change -- switching from one type of fat to another -- can significantly impact your health, but as you will see here, the type of fat you fancy really matters. Some fats, especially olive oil, have more healthful properties than others, so to make the right choices, it's important to know the differences among the various kinds.

There are four types of dietary fats, also known as fatty acids, and each has different health effects, depending on its source and how it is produced.

Monounsaturated fat. This is the healthiest type of fat. It promotes heart health and might help prevent cancer and a host of other ailments. Monounsaturated fat helps lower "bad" LDL cholesterol levels without negatively affecting the "good" HDL cholesterol. Olive oil, peanut oil, canola oil, and avocados are rich in healthy monounsaturated fat.

Polyunsaturated fat. Polyunsaturated fat is moderately healthy. It lowers LDL cholesterol, which is good, but it also reduces levels of artery-clearing HDL cholesterol. Polyunsaturated fat is usually liquid at room temperature and is the predominant type of fatty acid in soybean oil, safflower oil, corn oil, and several other vegetable oils.

Saturated fat. This fat is unhealthy because the body turns it into artery-clogging cholesterol, which is harmful to your heart. Saturated fat is mostly found in animal products and is solid at room temperature. It is the white fat you see along the edge or marbled throughout a piece of meat and is the fat in the skin of poultry. It is also "hidden" in whole milk and foods made from whole milk, as well as in tropical oils such as coconut oil. Dietitians recommend that people eat only small amounts of saturated fat.

Trans fat. Trans fat is the worst type of fat; you're best off avoiding it. Most trans fat is manufactured by forcing hydrogen into liquid polyunsaturated fat in a process called hydrogenation. The process can create a solid fat product -- margarine is made this way. Hydrogenation gives foods that contain trans fats a longer shelf life and helps stabilize their flavors, but your body pays a big price.

The body recognizes trans fat as being saturated and converts it to cholesterol, which raises LDL levels and lowers HDL levels. What's worse is that unlike saturated fat, trans fat disrupts cell membranes.

Cell membranes are comprised of uniformly configured fatty acid chains that are linked together through tight chemical bonds. When trans fat works its way into the chains, it alters these bonds and creates "leaks" in the cell membrane. This action upsets the flow of nutrients and waste products into and out of the cell and may be linked to reduced immune function and possibly cancer.

Fried foods in restaurants may contain large amounts of trans fats if they are cooked in partially hydrogenated oil. However, thanks to pressure from consumer and health groups, some restaurants are now using liquid soybean oil rather than partially hydrogenated soybean oil. This costs the restaurant a little more but is healthier for you.

Many fast-food restaurant chains display a nutrition facts brochure -- check this literature to see how much trans fat is in each food. When dining elsewhere, ask your server whether the cooks use a trans-fat-free oil. When frying foods at home, be sure to use a liquid oil, such as heart-healthy olive oil, rather than shortening, which is created by hydrogenation.

Meat and milk are also sources of trans fat, but they contain very little. These naturally occurring trans

fats do not appear to have any negative health consequences.

Majority Rules

The fat we eat is made up of varying amounts of the different fats just described. When a food is predominantly comprised of one type of fat, we call it by that name. For instance, olive oil is high in monounsaturated fat. Even though it contains other types of fat, olive oil is referred to as a monounsaturated fat.

You'll see at a glance that olive oil outweighs any other fat when it comes to health-promoting monounsaturated fat content.

Type of fat	Monounsaturated	Polyunsaturated	Saturated	Other elements
Olive oil	74 %	8 %	14 %	4 %
Canola oil	59 %	30 %	7 %	4 %
Peanut oil	46 %	32 %	17 %	5 %
Corn oil	24 %	59 %	13 %	4 %
Soybean oil	23 %	58 %	14 %	4 %
Sunflower oil	20 %	65 %	10 %	5 %
Safflower oil	14 %	75 %	6 %	5 %
Walnut oil	23 %	63 %	9 %	5 %
Palm kernel oil	11 %	2 %	81 %	6 %
Palm oil	37 %	9 %	50 %	4 %
Coconut oil	6 %	2 %	86 %	6 %
Butter	30 %	4 %	62 %	4 %
Shortening	30 %	37 %	29 %	4 %
Tallow (rendered fat of cattle or sheep)	42 %	4 %	50 %	4 %

Note: Due to rounding, not all values will equal 100 percent for each type of fat

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service. 2005. USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference, Release 18. Nutrient Data Laboratory Home Page, www.ars.usda.gov/ba/bhnrc/ndl

An Olive's Omegas

There are two important polyunsaturated fats that are essential for human health, but the body cannot make them. This means we must get them from the foods we eat. These two essential fatty acids are alpha-linolenic acid, an omega-3 fatty acid, and linoleic acid, an omega-6 fatty acid. The body gets both from olive oil.

Your Right to Know

By rule of the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), as of January 1, 2006, food manufacturers are required to list the amount of trans fat on nutrition labels. The FDA rule

Omega-3 oils are the healthiest. They are part of a group of substances called prostaglandins that help keep blood cells from sticking together, increase blood flow, and reduce inflammation. This makes omega-3 oils useful in preventing cardiovascular disease as well as inflammatory conditions, such as arthritis.

Omega-6 oils are healthy, too, but they are not quite as helpful as omega-3's. Omega-6's can help form prostaglandins that are similarly beneficial to the ones produced by omega-3's, but they can also produce harmful prostaglandins. The unfavorable prostaglandins increase blood-cell stickiness and promote cardiovascular disease, and they also appear to be linked to the formation of cancer.

To encourage your body to make beneficial prostaglandins from omega-6 oils, you should decrease the amount of animal fats you eat. Too many animal fats tend to push your body into using omega-6 oils to make the unfavorable prostaglandins rather than the helpful ones.

The research is inconclusive about how much omega-6 you should eat compared to the amount of omega-3. Many researchers suggest consuming one to four times more omega-6's than omega-3's. However, the typical American eats anywhere from 11 to 30 times more omega-6's than omega-3's.

The U.S. Dietary Reference Intakes for essential fatty acids recommends the consumption of omega-6 and omega-3 fats in a ratio of 10-to-1. This means consuming ten times more omega-6's than omega-3's. Lucky for us, nature provided that exact ratio of fat in each little olive. The linoleic-to-linolenic ratio is about 10-to-1.

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states that the amount of trans fat in a serving should be listed by weight (in grams) on a separate line under saturated fat.

However, according to the FDA, food manufacturers are allowed to list the amount of trans fat per serving in a food as zero grams if the actual amount is less than 0.5 gram. That is why you may see a product that has partially hydrogenated vegetable oil listed as an ingredient but has trans fat content listed as zero grams.

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