

Is Fat Still The Enemy?

Public health officials must struggle to balance accuracy with simplicity in their messages. Accuracy creates 500-page scientific documents that are incomprehensible to most readers. Simplicity, on the other hand, can leave out important information and lead to misinterpretation. Some health scientists believe this is the case with the advice to 'eat less fat.'

Focus on fat... Over the past 20 years, health professionals have been advising Americans to dramatically decrease their consumption of dietary fat to reduce risks of obesity and heart disease. In response to these warnings, health-conscious consumers have been changing their eating habits to reduce fat intake. Food manufacturers have responded to consumer demand for reduced-fat products, reformulating recipes for everything from baked goods to salad dressings.

Many public health experts now believe that this 'reduced fat' approach to healthful eating has been too simplistic and has backfired in some ways. Especially worrisome is our nationwide increase in the percentage of adults who are overweight, since excess body fat is associated with increased risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and poor blood lipid profile (high cholesterol, low HDL and high triglycerides).

While the death rate from heart disease has declined, more people than ever are under lifelong medical management for chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and high serum cholesterol levels. This medical management comes primarily in the form of expensive drugs, many of which have significant side effects. And despite the decline in heart disease death rates, U.S. rates are still quite high compared to those of most countries, and cardiovascular disease is still the leading cause of death for both men and women.

What went wrong? In the 1960s, when scientists first began to uncover links between diet and heart disease, they found that heart disease risk has an especially strong association with intake of a certain type of fat: saturated fat. Foods with high levels of saturated fats include meat and dairy products. High-fat meats such as bacon, sausage, prime rib and other fatty cuts, and high-fat dairy products such as whole milk, butter and ice cream, were identified as contributing to heart disease risk. Nutritionists began educating clients about the different types of fats and urged people to avoid saturated fats.

This advice still holds true today, and foods high in saturated fats should be replaced with more healthful foods. Unfortunately, many consumers have heard the first part of the message (replace foods high in saturated fats) without fully implementing the second part (adding more healthful foods). Some people have figured that if fat-free cookies are more healthful than cookies made with loads of butter, that they should be able to consume fat-free cookies in limitless quantities.

In addition, as obesity rates began to climb, people who wanted to lose weight were advised to reduce intake of all types of fat. This advice was grounded in the observations that fats contain more calories per unit weight than proteins or

carbohydrates, and that dietary fat is easily converted by the body into storage fat. Fat quickly became the enemy.

Are carbohydrates bad? As health-conscious consumers jumped on the reduced-fat bandwagon, they began consuming greater quantities of other calorie sources, which created more problems for some people. Two of these calorie sources are especially problematic: simple carbohydrates (sugars) and trans fatty acids.

Most carbohydrates are still good for you. Carbohydrates from whole grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables are the foundation of a healthful diet. Too many refined carbohydrates and sugars, on the other hand, add too many empty calories to the diet, and in people who are overweight, can lead to elevated serum triglycerides. People who are overweight often have problems regulating blood sugar levels and are better off avoiding high doses of carbohydrates.

How did trans fatty acids get into this picture? As food manufacturers needed to replace saturated fats in food products, they searched for other fats that would be as stable at room temperature. Unsaturated fats (the good fats) are less stable than saturated fats and become rancid more quickly. Food manufacturers found that they could prolong the shelf life of their products by adding hydrogen to oils high in unsaturated fats, a process known as hydrogenation. Eventually, scientists discovered that hydrogenation creates a new kind of fat, trans fat, which acts like saturated fats in food products and in the body. In other words, it is just as harmful as saturated fat.

High-protein, low-carb diets! Many people swear by high-protein diets for weight loss. Nevertheless, while such diets may lead to short-term weight loss, they are too high in saturated fats and too low in fruits, vegetables and fiber. Consider the volumes of studies that link a high consumption of plant foods to positive health outcomes.

Just as a 'reduced fat' approach was too simplistic, so too is a 'reduced carbohydrate' approach. A healthful diet needs nutritious sources of fat, carbohydrates and protein. Nutritious sources of fat include avocados, nuts and seeds, and plant oils. Nutritious sources of carbohydrates include whole grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables.

Calories consumed must be balanced with physical activity to achieve weight control. Reducing intake of saturated and a trans fat continues to be important for the prevention of heart disease.

