



Q & A: saturated fat and butter

Q. We've heard a lot of reports that saturated fat is now good for our health. Is this true?

Despite sensationalist news headlines and one-off pieces of research, the Heart Foundation's position remains the same – that we should replace saturated fats in our diets with unsaturated fats. That means getting our fats from foods like avocado, oily fish, nuts and seeds, and plant oils like olive and canola oils, instead of foods like butter, cream, meat fat and coconut.

The evidence is clear that replacing saturated fat with unsaturated fats, particularly polyunsaturated fats, is beneficial for the heart. A few recent studies that promote saturated fat diets are not sufficient to refute the large existing body of evidence that shows a strong link between a higher intake of saturated fats, elevated blood cholesterol and heart disease.

Q. I've heard butter is good for us. Is this right?

While using small amounts of butter occasionally shouldn't be a problem for most people, there are far healthier fats to be choosing. The clear, unequivocal evidence remains that it is better for our hearts to replace saturated fats with unsaturated fats, particularly polyunsaturated fats. Making the simple swap from butter to margarine or other plant-based spreads is one way to do this.

Other sources of healthy unsaturated fats include: nuts, seeds, oily fish, avocado and plant oils, such as cold-pressed olive, avocado or canola oil. For those who choose not to use margarine spreads, consider avocado, hummus and nut or seed butters as good options for a less-processed, more whole food approach, or use no spread at all.

Rather than focusing on specific foods (such as butter) or nutrients, it's important for us to focus on the bigger picture – which is our overall dietary pattern. A heart-healthy eating pattern is based largely on minimally-processed foods with plenty of vegetables and fruit. It includes some whole grains in the place of refined grains. It also includes legumes, nuts, seeds, and other sources of healthy fats such as oily fish. It may also contain non-processed lean meats or poultry and/or dairy.

Q. Are foods high in saturated fat (such as butter and coconut oil) now recommended as part of a healthy diet?

No, evidence still proves that diets lower in saturated fat reduce our risk of heart disease. The link between a higher intake of saturated fats, elevated blood cholesterol and heart disease is well established. The current body of evidence supports replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats, particularly polyunsaturated fats, to reduce the risk of heart disease.

Foods high in saturated fat include butter, lard, cream, cheese, coconut oil and palm oil.

Q. How much fat is too much?

It depends on the individual and a range of fat intakes is acceptable. What's important is the type of fat we're eating. The traditional Mediterranean diet is a relatively high-fat diet, while the traditional Japanese diet is lower in fat. However, both diets have been linked with lower rates of heart disease. A similarity between both diets is the lower intake of saturated fat.

Consuming copious amounts of fat is not good for us. Given all fats are energy dense, we still need to be conscious of our overall fat intake, in the context of a healthy diet.