



Q & A Dairy and the Heart

Q: What type of dairy should I choose – reduced fat or full fat?

Based on current evidence, the Heart Foundation continues to recommend that New Zealanders choose mostly unsweetened, reduced and low-fat dairy options as part of a heart-healthy eating pattern.

Q: Why haven't the recommendations changed?

The evidence supports choosing reduced-fat dairy (milk, yoghurt and cheese) over full-fat to reduce risk for some, but not all, cardiovascular risk factors. While dairy foods may be neutral in relation to heart disease, eating less dairy fat in favour of heart-healthy unsaturated sources of fat or healthier foods is associated with reduced risk.

A heart-healthy dietary pattern is dietary pattern emphasises vegetables and fruit, with unrefined grains, legumes, and, if eaten, non-processed lean meats, poultry and oily fish, and reduced fat yoghurt, milk and cheese.

Q: Is dairy good for me?

Yes. Dairy is a nutritious food that can be part of a heart-healthy dietary pattern. Milk, yoghurt and cheese contain protein, and vitamins and minerals such as riboflavin, vitamins A and B12, calcium, zinc, and phosphorous.

Q. Do I need to follow a low-fat diet?

No. A range of fat intakes are acceptable; it depends on the individual. The traditional Mediterranean diet, is a relatively higher fat diet whereas the traditional Japanese diet is lower in fat. Both diets have been linked with lower rates of heart disease – the similarity between both diets is the lower intake of saturated fat. If you follow a heart-healthy eating pattern which focuses on choosing mostly whole and less-processed foods, with plenty of vegetables and fruit, then the fats will take care of themselves.

Q. Is fat bad for me?

No. We need fat to survive. The Heart Foundation continues to promote focusing on the type or quality of fat, rather than the amount. There is clear evidence to show that replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats, particularly polyunsaturated fats, has benefits for heart health. The sources of fat that are part of a heart-healthy eating pattern include nuts, seeds, oily fish, avocado, olives and most plant oils. These and other plant fats should be the predominant sources of fat in the diet.

Q. What about the saturated fat in dairy?

While the evidence is inconsistent about whether or not dairy fat directly affects your risk of heart disease, there is evidence that replacing dairy fat with healthier options is associated with reduced risk of heart disease.

What we also know, and where the bulk of the evidence lies, is that replacing saturated fat with unsaturated fats helps to reduce your risk of heart disease.

Whilst there is some ambiguity around dairy fat, there is ample evidence that the sources of fat that promote health are nuts, seeds, oily fish, avocado, and most plant oils, and these should be the predominant sources of fat in the diet. They are best eaten within a dietary pattern that emphasises vegetables and fruit, with unrefined grains, legumes, and, if eaten, non-processed lean meats, poultry and oily fish, and unsweetened reduced fat yoghurt, milk and cheese.

Q. Are all saturated fats equal?

While the saturated fat in dairy products might not be as 'harmful' as once thought and may be neutral in relation to heart disease, there is evidence that replacing dairy fat with heart-healthy unsaturated sources of fat or healthier options is associated with reduced risk of heart disease.

The 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. The overall body of evidence still supports that we should continue to replace saturated fats in our diet, with unsaturated fats (from foods such as oily fish, nuts, seeds, avocado and heart-healthy plant oils e.g. olive oil), to reduce our risk of heart disease.

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 oil, instead of foods like butter, cream, meat fat and coconut.

Q. How much saturated fat are Kiwis eating?

The average saturated-fat intakes for adult New Zealanders is 13 % of daily energy. The main sources of saturated fat in the diet are butter and milk.

The recommended intake for saturated fat and trans-fats together is no more than 10 % of total energy. For your heart, we recommend limiting saturated and trans-fat intake to 8 % of total energy. Switching to reduced-fat dairy, can be one way to help reduce your total saturated fat intake.

Q. Is butter back?

No. While using small amounts of butter every now and then shouldn't be a problem for most people, the clear, unequivocal evidence remains that there are far better fats for our heart than butter. The evidence is clear that we should replace saturated fats (such as butter, coconut oil and fatty meat) with unsaturated fats. Making the simple swap from butter to plant-based oils and spreads is one way to do this.

It is important to note that the Dairy and the Heart review assessed the impact of milk, yoghurt and cheese on the heart, not butter.

Q. Is it ok to have full-fat milk in my coffee?

In light of the findings of the Heart Foundation's Dairy and the Heart and Fats and Oils Evidence Papers, and that most New Zealanders are getting more saturated fat than recommended, switching to reduced-fat milk would be of benefit. However, ultimately what's important to reduce your risk of heart disease, is to focus on a heart-healthy way of eating. If you are eating this way, and your diet is relatively low in total saturated fat (or dairy only makes up a small part of your diet), then the type of milk (whether it be full fat, reduced fat, or fat free) you use is probably of less importance.

However, if you continue to have saturated-fat intakes higher than recommended and a poor diet, then it would be wise to use reduced-fat or trim milk in your coffee. Likewise if you are a big consumer of dairy, then switching to reduced or low-fat options can be a useful way of cutting back on the saturated-fat content of your diet.