



There's good fat?

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There it lies, steaming slightly and fragrant beyond description. It is a lovely dish of pasta covered in a generous serving of tomato-meat sauce and garnished with a sprinkle of fresh grated parmesan cheese. It is the good. The bad. The ugly. Yes, this is going to be spaghetti related.

Your dinner probably exhibits all three characteristics of good, bad and really bad fats. The vegetable oil used in the sauce is good for you; the animal fat in the meat bad; and the spread on your garlic bread? Really bad. (Naturally, we have to generalize to make the analogy work!)

We have all heard that fat is bad for us. It is linked to heart disease, cancer, type 2 diabetes and obesity. So why not avoid it entirely? Turns out the body needs fat to function properly. But not all fat is created equal, and too much of any type can add too many calories. High fat does cause weight gain, but that is because it leads to more calories coming in that are being used up, just like any other source of calories. It's just that fat has more than double the calories of proteins and carbs.

What we call the 'good' fats are the unsaturated fats coming from plant sources. They include mono-unsaturated (like olive, canola, and peanut oils), and the polyunsaturated fats, also called omega-3 or omega-6 and found in high concentrations in sunflower and soybean oils and in fatty fish.

The 'bad' fats come from animal sources (mostly) including meat and dairy, but are also found in palm kernel and coconut oils. These saturated fats make blood cholesterol worse, but more on that later.

And the really 'ugly' fats? Trans fats are the real bad boys of the fat world. They are produced by hydrogenation, or the process of heating vegetable oil in the presence of hydrogen. The result is a fat that is both more stable and has a longer shelf life. It also makes the oil solid at room temperature. Both margarine and shortening are made from vegetable oil in this way. Trans fats are found especially in snack foods, commercially fried products, and those made with shortening or margarine. While liquid vegetable oils good for us, once hydrogenated, they are worse than saturated fats.

Trans fats increase levels of bad cholesterol (Low Density Lipoprotein, or LDL) and decrease that of the good (High Density Lipoprotein or HDL) in the blood. Good cholesterol helps carry away the bad and reduces build-up on the walls of blood vessels (you have seen it on TV — yuck!)

Fats provide key nourishment to the body but taken in excess or in the wrong forms does little good, and a great deal of bad. Trans fats have been shown to lead to health problems even in very low amounts (only a few grams per day). Unfortunately, Canadians ingest an average of eight to 39 grams of trans fats daily.

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