

## *“Rambling on with Kathleen”*

### *Fats, Fats, Fats!*

We are constantly hearing about fats in the diet. We are told to limit fat to decrease our own fat. We don't even have to look at food labels because information about fats is almost always on the front of the box as well - calling out to us because the product has “less fat” or “reduced fat” or “low fat”. Then we look at the food label and see it doesn't end there! Saturated fats are listed as well as total fat, trans fat and unsaturated fats and even something called “fatty acids”. So, what does this all mean and how can I choose a healthy menu with all of this confusing information bombarding me?

First of all, our bodies do need all of these fats in moderation to support cell growth and to give us energy. Fats also help to keep us warm and protect our organs (some of us more than others) and are involved in other bodily functions such as absorbing nutrients and the fat soluble vitamins A, D, E and K.

The poly unsaturated fats (seafood, flaxseed, walnuts, canola oils, etc.) provide us with what are called “omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids” which are essential to our bodies. These essential fatty acids must come from our diet and are found in membranes of our cells throughout our bodies. They are thought to assist in the functioning of our cardiovascular, GI, immune and musculoskeletal systems. We can also purchase these in pill form at pharmacies and health food labs and stores.

The fats are listed according to their chemical structures and physical properties. For example, the bad fats such as saturated and trans fats like butter, margarine or animal fat will be solid at room temperature and others such as vegetable oil will remain liquid.

The three main categories of dietary fats in foods are:

1. Saturated (carbon atoms are “saturated” with hydrogen atoms)
2. Trans Fats (trans –which merely refers to the position of the hydrogen atoms of the fat around the carbon chain, also formed during “hydrogenation” such as when making margarine)
3. Unsaturated: Monounsaturated and Polyunsaturated – known as the good fats

So, why is this information important to us?

Saturated Fat is a cause of high cholesterol. It is found in meats / animal foods and some plant foods. Saturated fats are also found in dairy and even in what is referred to as the tropical oils such as cocoa butter, palm and coconut oil.

Trans Fats or hydrogenated fats: Trans fats are also found in small amounts in animal meats and fat. But even more importantly are formed during a manufacturing process called hydrogenation. This process turns oils into a solid fat such as what occurs when making margarine, and shortening. These fats are thought to raise cholesterol levels.

Mono and polyunsaturated fats are found in fish, nuts, seeds and oils from most plants. These are thought to help to lower “bad” cholesterol levels and might even raise “good” cholesterol.

So why is this important? Marketers have become very savvy with using information to promote their products. We need to know how to read this information in the food labels in order to understand what is really inside that package. One might automatically assume that mayonnaise is bad for you but if it is made with oils like soy or canola it might be low in saturated or trans fats. So, the same product made by different companies may be very different indeed.

Reading food labels will share much information required for us to make healthy choices. It is recommended that we decrease the saturated and trans fats and increase the unsaturated fats in our diet. Please remember that all of these fats are important in moderation. As usual, it is most important to discuss any questions about your diet and health with your health care provider and/or nutritionist before making any major and constant changes in your dietary eating habits or before taking any supplements.

Resources: Nutrition Fact Sheets, Cardiac Diet Nutrition Information, American Heart Association, Women to Women nutrition newsletter, internet searches and other personal, professional experience

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