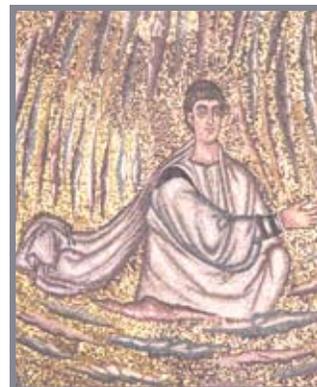


# Fat

A summary of issues related to fat in food. You get my finely honed and measured opinions tossed in for free, of course.

an essay by Alan Yoder



Fat is an essential part of nutrition and of good food. There is, unfortunately, little agreement on what kind of fat and how much of it is good for you. The following is a list of issues

- Percentage of fat in the diet
- Meat and animal fat
- Vegetarianism
- Fish fats and cholesterol
- Vegetable fats
- Saturated fats
- Trans fats
- Obesity (human fat)

For each of these there is a range of opinion in the food and nutrition literature. Taken together, the possible combinations of answers are bewildering. The number of published diets with large variations among them is testimony to this. I'm going to take a walk through these issues with you, but I may as well tell you right now, my recommendation in the end will be to eat good simple food, prepared with affection and attention to its value, and not to worry too much.

## Saturated vs unsaturated fat

Saturated fat is, loosely speaking, fat that congeals at room temperature. Unsaturated fat remains liquid. With the exception of coconut fat, some of which congeals, I'm not aware of any naturally occurring vegetable-based saturated fats. Those available on the market are all synthesized by some process from a vegetable oil.

## Percentage of fat in the diet

Even vegans acknowledge the need for fat in the diet. They get it from oils and nuts, avocados and coconuts, and so on. I haven't done an exhaustive study, but my impression is that it is generally agreed that around 30% of our dietary intake should be in the form of fat (and oil). This is a significant amount. A 2000-calorie diet requires the consumption of almost a pound of protein, carbohydrates and fat altogether per day (the water content in many foods bulks up the quantity considerably from there). At 30%, fat and oil constitute 4 1/2 ounces of that. That's a quarter pounder!

Astonishingly, the average American exceeds this, and consumes food with fat percentages in the 50% range or better. Furthermore, the fat eaten is often of the worst kind—processed oils and fats from petrochemically grown products no one would have considered eating 100 years ago. When was the last time you wolfed down some cotton or munched on dried broccoli seed (canola is a recently developed hybrid seed oil plant related to broccoli)? Yet cottonseed and canola oils are exceedingly common in processed food. Ever taken a bite of "field corn", fed to cows and used for corn oil? You've got to be *really* hungry.

## Meat and animal fat

Meat is often avoided by folks on low fat or low cholesterol diets. However, these diets seem to be falling out of favor, which leads to the question, how do I find meat

that is good for me? Are some kinds better than others?

I believe the answer is simple. Meat from animals that are well cared for and lovingly prepared is simply going to be better for you than meat gotten from vast crowded, unsanitary feedlots, automated butchering operations and ginormous commercial food processing plants. There are to date no studies that I'm aware of that measure the degree to which this is true, so I'm simply going to assert it. It aligns well with my experience that an "inferior" cut of meat from a great butcher will often cook and taste better than a prime cut from a meat factory. That's something that my well educated palate *does* know how to measure!

I have been unable to experientially verify the common idea that white meat is somehow better for you. Chicken and turkey fat are really not very healthy stuff. It's tempting to wonder if the reason these meats are found better in dietary studies is that their fats are usually expressed and skimmed away, and that a non fatty meat is then being compared to a more fatty one such as beef, ignoring the fact that we need fat in our diet and will get it somehow. This sort of wishy-washiness is annoyingly common in the "studies" that are done.

While on the subject of worthy meats, I cannot pass up an opportunity to plug the duck, one of the most noble of animals. It is high on the list of foods eaten frequently by the French and Chinese, both of whom have a habit of thumbing their collective noses at the American dietary establishment and then all of a sudden not dropping dead of heart attacks as was predicted. Duck fat is probably the best cooking fat there is. *Foie gras du canard* is one of the finest foods ever to grace a plate. Duck confit is wonderful by itself, and indispensable in regional dishes such as *cassoulet*. Consider the duck, and add him to your diet!

At the lower end of the meat scale—in other words accepted by some vegetarians—because they are not meat *per se*—butter and eggs are two things that hardly anyone 100 years ago would have considered doing without. Yet today we are still told they are

bad for us. Butter has too much saturated fat and eggs have too much cholesterol. As a result of this, many Americans eat revolting imitations based on highly processed alternatives such as artificially flavored margarine and powdered egg product.

The nutritional establishment has started to reconsider its long held stance on this subject. See my companion essay on [statistics](#) for a possible explanation.

## Vegetarianism

One of the most interesting studies I ever read about was one which found that a pure vegan diet—no meat, milk, eggs or animal products of any kind—may actually reverse the course of Type II diabetes in some people. This interested me so much that I—diagnosed then as a prediabetic—attempted to go vegan. This meant that I had to develop a real vegan cuisine, unfortunately, as there really is no such thing; the vegan recipes available on the internet are mostly a very sad affair. I ultimately abandoned this effort and went back to eating good simple food, affectionately and attentively prepared, mostly by me. But my [cook-book](#) has been to some extent influenced by this period in my life.

One of the interesting discoveries I made during these vegan researches was that most of the canned chicken and beef broth available in stores is 100% fat and cholesterol free. So if you are on a low fat or low cholesterol diet, you can use these great flavor bases without qualm.

## Fish fats

Another thing to know about cholesterol is that most fish contains far more "good" (LDL) cholesterol than "bad" (HDL) cholesterol. It has been found by some researchers that eating foods like this will promote good cholesterol balance.

Of course if you eat fish, you'll get alarmed by all the reports of mercury and other toxins in your fish. Then there are reports that farmed fish, somewhat like meat animals reared in close confinement, are subject to problems stemming from the

food and other waste that accumulate on the shallow ocean floor under the farm pens.

One has to balance these worries against the benefits. My advice is to vary your diet and try not to eat too much of any one kind of fish. I also believe that until fish farming matures and gets an environmental clue, it may be best to avoid farmed fish.

## Vegetable fats

Of all vegetable fats, olive oil is clearly the king and queen both. In my cookbook, I advise you to keep several kinds around for variation of flavor and expense. One should always use cold-pressed oils. Other oils such as sesame and grapeseed oils are also good for cooking. A good grade of peanut oil is also nice, especially for potatoes.

When you can, avoid commodity oils like canola, palm, cottonseed, peanut and corn oil.

## Trans fats

Commodity vegetable oil products have historically been treated with a process called hydrogenation to increase their saturation, heat tolerance and shelf life. This introduces "trans fats" into them. Trans fatty acids are neither required by the body nor good for it, yet Crisco, until recently, was 10% trans fat. Thankfully, this is changing, thanks to a public outcry amid sensational exhibits like the movie *Supersize Me*. New processes have been developed that don't leave trans fats in the product. I still recommend that you avoid these products unless you are vegetarian or kosher. In that case, Crisco is about your only option when you want a pie crust.

## Obesity

I am considered obese by the dietary establishment and prediabetic by my doctor,

though my new blood sugar meter says my blood sugar levels are actually not too bad. I have refused his offer of medication, but taken his advice to use an herbal diuretic when I am retaining water, and to take flax oil pills regularly for their Omega-3 fatty acid content. I'm down 15 pounds from my all-time high and have held steady for two years. I feel pretty healthy, walk a moderate amount, and enjoy life.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The recommendations of common sense, concerning fat in the diet, are pretty simple.

- Don't eat too much meat. Fresh and freshly cooked vegetables are good for you. When you do eat meat, try to get it from a good butcher that you trust.
- Butter and eggs are okay, but don't over-use them. I mostly use butter in sauces. There are many things normally fried in butter that olive oil works just as well for. It simply tastes different, neither better nor worse. So use olive oil or things made with it in preference to butter when the tastes are right.
- Eat fish regularly. Don't eat the same kind all the time. Try to stick with wild fish. There may come a time when farmed fish is actually better for you and the planet than wild fish, but the evidence says we're not there yet.
- Use only cold-pressed vegetable oils from plants whose fruits and seeds you might also eat. Olives, grapes, peanuts, and sesame seeds are good. Some folks like nut oils like walnut or almond oil on salads too.
- Avoid highly processed foods if you can. Cheap candy, cookies, chips and baked goods contain horrendous quantities of commodity fats. Premade meals are much the same.
- Learn to cook!