



Are you confused by what are considered “good” or healthy fats? Which is better for health—butter or margarine? Butter, as an animal product, contains both saturated fat and cholesterol. These are known to increase LDL (bad) and total blood cholesterol levels and raise your risk for coronary heart disease. Stick margarine has been found to contain the harmful trans fats (hydrogenated fats). Trans fats increase LDL (bad) cholesterol and lower HDL (good) cholesterol levels. Now we have the option of non-hydrogenated tub margarines which are trans fat free. The American Heart Association has recently come out with a recommendation to keep trans fat in our diets at less than 1% of total calories each day. (see <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4582>) That means for an intake of 1800 calories a day, trans fat intake should not exceed 2 grams/day. In choosing a tub margarine, look for one that is trans fat free, that contains less than 2 grams of saturated fat per tablespoon, and which has a liquid vegetable oil as the first ingredient. Here are some brands that meet those criteria:

- Blue Bonnet
- Canola Harvest
- Fleishmann's
- I Can't Believe It's Not Butter
- Promise
- Smart Balance Light

How about healthy cooking oils? The best cooking oils would contain higher amounts of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats (these lower LDL and total cholesterol) and minimal or no saturated fats and trans fat. Oils higher in monounsaturated fat content are most desirable because they may also give the HDL (good) cholesterol level a boost. These oils would include olive, canola and peanut oils. I like olive oil for sautéing and canola oil for baking. Peanut oil has a high smoke point so it's good for stir-frying. Other acceptable oils would be safflower, sunflower, soy, cottonseed, and corn oils. Choose an oil with less than 2 grams of saturated fat per tablespoon.

All fats are concentrated in calories so they should be used sparingly in both food preparation and overall consumption. The American Heart Association recommends keeping total fat intake to 30-35% of our total daily calories. Because fats pack in more calories per gram than protein and carbohydrate, small amounts will assist in limiting overall calorie intake and maintaining a healthy body weight.

Fats to avoid because of their high saturated and trans fat content include vegetable shortening, hard margarine, butter, palm kernel oil, and coconut oil. Saturated fat intake should be limited to less than 7% of total calorie intake (that's 14 grams for an 1800 calorie diet). Saturated fats are solid at room temperature and are primarily found in foods of animal origin—meats and full fat dairy, processed meats such as bacon, hotdogs and sausage, organ meats, bakery goods, solid fats as well as some vegetable oils (palm oil, palm kernel oil, and coconut oil). Saturated fats are the main dietary factor in raising blood cholesterol.

What about Omega-3 fats that seem to be in the news lately? These are polyunsaturated fats. Studies show that a diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids may help lower blood triglycerides and increase HDL (good) cholesterol. Research has proven that a diet rich in omega-3 fats will indeed reduce the incidence of cardiovascular disease. These fats may help reduce blood clot formation, act as anti-inflammatory agent, lower blood pressure and reduce risk of arrhythmias and sudden death.

Omega-3 fats are found in these foods:

- Fish, especially cold-water fatty fish such as mackerel, salmon, sardines and herring (The American Heart Association suggest we eat fish at least 2 times per week!)
- Soy and tofu
- Nuts and seeds-almonds, walnuts, pine nuts and flax seed
- Flaxseed oil, canola oil, soybean oil
- Eggs with high omega-3 content (from feed provided to chickens)
- Foods fortified with omega-3 fats (I just bought Smart Balance peanut butter that has omega-3 fats from added flax seed oil!)

Fish is preferred as a source of omega-3 fats as it contains two of these fats, known as eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). Flax seed has a high content of alpha-linolenic acid (ALA) which is converted to omega-3 fat by your body. Flaxseed is also rich in lignan which contains additional health benefits with antioxidants and fiber. Flax has a nutty flavor and contains 60 calories per tablespoon. It can be added to foods such as cereal, yogurt or salad or used in baking. Flaxseed needs to be ground to make the nutrients available (or they just pass through your GI tract!) Flaxseed oil does not contain the fiber or antioxidants offered in the seed. Both brown and golden flaxseeds have similar nutrient composition and they can be found locally in bulk at Wheatsfield Co-op, Fareway (packaged as Bob's Red Mill brand) and the Health Markets of Hy-Vee stores. It's best to buy the seeds and grind them yourself as they go rancid more quickly after being ground. It only takes a few seconds in a blender or coffee grinder to grind the seeds. I grind enough to use for a week or two and keep both whole seeds and ground meal in my freezer.

Tips for Using Flax Seed

- Drink plenty of water. There is so much soluble fiber in flax that it is important to drink plenty of water when eating flax products, otherwise constipation may result.
- Remember to start slowly if you aren't used to a high fiber diet.
- If you purchase the whole seeds, you need to grind them up to get the benefit.
- Flax can be used as an egg substitute in baked goods for people who can't or choose not to eat eggs – this is because of the soluble fiber, which adds structure to the food. (1 Tbsp flax meal plus 3 Tbsp. water for each egg)
- About 2/3 to 3/4C of flax seed yields 1 cup of flax meal.
- Store seeds and meal in cool, dark, dry place such as refrigerator or freezer. Seeds will last one year in freezer and ground flaxseed meal will last a few weeks in refrigerator or freezer

Attached are some recipes for both salmon and flaxseed so that you can try to incorporate more of these healthy fats into your diet! There is also some information on the mercury content of fish which is something that needs to be considered. Most food safety experts agree that the health benefits of many fish (including salmon) outweigh the risks of the mercury and PCB's except perhaps for children, pregnant women and women of child-bearing age

The current thinking is not to severely restrict fat or avoid it altogether. Fats is needed for our bodies to function properly and fats offer both taste and satiety (fullness).Focus on reducing foods high in saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol and selecting more foods made with unsaturated fats. These would include the healthy oils (mentioned above), avocados, nuts, and fish (see preferred types above).

Enjoy your weekend-drink plenty of water and try to find a way to stay cool!

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