

BODYTALK
WITH
MICHAEL VAN STRATEN
ON

CLASSIC GOLD

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A MATTER OF FAT

'Fat is bad' seems to be the universal message. It gives you heart disease, clogs up your arteries, causes high blood pressure, is linked to breast pain, bowel cancer, obesity and a host of other health horrors. Everywhere you look there are adverts, posters and food labels screaming 'low fat' messages – as if you'd expect your breakfast cereal, a loaf of bread or carton of pure fruit juice to have much fat in the first place.

Low fat labels have become the latest marketing tool of the food industry to persuade you to buy yet more processed, packaged, frozen and generally low in nutrients factory-produced meals.

I see women in my surgery who think that low fat means no fat and can tell me off by heart the fat and calorie content of most products on their local supermarket shelves. But is this healthy? The answer is absolutely no.

On the other hand, the average Brit chomps their way through almost two stones of fat each year – over 50 half-pound packs of lard. Just imagine what that's doing to the inside of your arteries - as well as providing 80,000 calories, enough to create 23 pounds of body fat!

Fat in diet has become a major health issue in recent years. But all too often, messages about fat are confusing. While most people now understand that we should all be eating less fat, when you poke about in their shopping baskets in the supermarket - like I do - it's easy to see what's going wrong. The average daily consumption of all fats is around 85 grams per person per day, when the ABSOLUTE MAXIMUM should be no more than 70 grams. A 15 gram difference may not seem a lot, but it adds up to an extra 135 of the least healthy calories.

Most of you look for leaner cuts of meat, lean mince, and lower-fat varieties of foods, but it's the hidden fats that cause the problem - tucked away in sausages, salamis, meat pies, pasties, scotch eggs, cakes, biscuits, Danish pastries, sweet and savoury snacks, spreads, mayonnaise and chocolate. If you read the labels and do some simple sums, you'll soon get it right.

Many of the women I see in my surgery go to the opposite extreme and think that low fat means no fat. This is just as unhealthy as too much. An excessive consumption of the worst sort of fats leads to raised cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart disease and is implicated in some forms of cancer. Too little fat means poor absorption of the fat soluble vitamins A, E, D and K – essential for natural resistance to infection, skin, eyes, heart and circulation, strong bones and normal blood clotting. There are also some essential fatty acids which the body cannot manufacture and have to be obtained from food.

Then, just when the great British public were getting the hang of the Mediterranean diet and its health benefits, a group of scientists told us that olive oil may be no better, or possibly even worse at preventing heart disease, than using cheap vegetable oil margarines. The authors of this short commentary in *The Lancet* (November 2000) criticise the EU for promoting the health benefits of olive oil simply to support olive growers in southern Europe. It's interesting that they came from the Danish Nutrition Council and the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University of Denmark. It can't have escaped many people's notice that Denmark isn't top of the world producers of olive oil. What they are good at is making lots of butter and other dairy products, bacon, sausages and pork – none of which are renowned for their health-giving properties.

There are literally dozens of published scientific papers which show that olive oil is an extremely healthy addition to any good diet which includes plenty of good bread, fruit, vegetables, salads, fish and sensible quantities of lean meat. To find your way through the maze of fat matters, ignore information which obviously comes from sources with vested interests in either promoting or rubbishing the health benefits of any fat or oil. Just stick to the facts. To help you, here's my star guide – five stars for brilliant, four for good, three for okay, two for be careful, one for God help you.

SATURATED FATS – two stars

These are nearly all animal fats from meat and meat products, poultry, lard, dripping, butter, cream and cheese. It's these fats that can lead to an increase in cholesterol, which in turn blocks the arteries and causes heart disease and raised blood pressure. Though there's little direct evidence that they play a role in the development of cancer, many experts believe that lower consumptions reduce the risks – especially of bowel cancer.

Average UK consumption: 32 grams per day.

Recommended consumption for women: 21 grams per day.

TRANS FATS – one star

These are manufactured from polyunsaturates and are the worst of all for the health of your heart. They crop up most commonly in hard margarines and to a lesser extent in the soft forms too. Margarine manufacturers have recently taken steps to reduce the amounts of trans fats in their products, but watch out for them in pre-packed snack foods. There is some evidence that trans fats are also linked to an increased risk of breast cancer. Any product which contains hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated vegetable oils may contain trans fats.

Margarine or butter? I have never been in any doubt that pure, unsalted natural butter is far superior to any form of margarine. Margarines are processed in factories and most contain flavourings, colourings, preservatives and other chemicals. Even those designed to lower cholesterol are expensive, have side effects and do nothing to change the eating habits or lifestyles of the people using them. For me, sparing use of butter will always be the healthy option.

Average UK consumption: not known.

Recommended consumption for women: as little as possible.

CONJUGATED LINOLEIC ACID (CLA) - five stars

CLA was first discovered just over 20 years ago by Professor Mike Pariza at the University of Wisconsin in the US. At that time, researchers in America were concerned that fried hamburgers may be a potential cause of cancer. Pariza found that this natural fat in beef had powerful anti-cancer properties. But his startling research showed that only free-range cattle, raised on natural grasslands actually contained CLA. As well as its anti-cancer properties, this valuable fat stimulates the human body's conversion of stored fats into energy. This is just one more good reason for choosing organic beef.

Average UK consumption: not known

Recommended consumption for women: not identified

MONO-UNSATURATED FATS – five stars

These are much better for your heart and can even help reduce the amount of cholesterol in your bloodstream. The richest sources are olives, olive oil, avocados, peanuts and peanut oil, walnuts and walnut oil. These fats, too, appear to have no role in the formation of cancer.

Average UK consumption; 30 grams per day.

Recommended consumption for women: 12.6 grams per day.

POLY-UNSATURATED FATS – four stars

For many years now poly-unsaturated oils and margarines have been linked to healthy heart benefits, but unfortunately it's not that simple. Apart from the presence of

extremely unhealthy trans fats in some margarines, it's the balance between the different types of fat in poly-unsaturated oils that is the most important factor.

Average UK consumption 14.1 grams per day. Recommended consumption for women 25.3 grams per day.

Linoleic, otherwise known as Omega-6 fatty acids, are essential for health and are found in most vegetable oils. But you really don't need much of them and excessive amounts can speed up the growth of cancer cells.

Alpha-linolenic - Omega-3 fatty acids are the healthiest of all and these crop up in oily fish and some vegetable oils, especially those made from rape seed, olives, walnuts and flax seeds. The Omega-3s not only protect against heart disease and cancer but are very important during pregnancy for the proper formation of the growing baby's brain cells. But this only applies to Omega-3s from fish oils. It is possible for some people to convert vegetable Omega-3s into the more important form obtained from fish but this is a very inefficient process which declines with age and, most scientists believe, does not replace the role of fish oils in brain development and cognitive function.

What matters is the proportions of these two fatty acids and the healthiest fats are those which have higher amounts of Omega-3 relative to Omega-6. Oils with lots of Omega-6 and very little Omega-3 put you in double jeopardy because of the likely cancer-forming properties of the Omega-6s and because they also have a negative effect on the heart protection benefits of Omega-3.

Fish Oils

Unlike fish liver oils these are extracted from the flesh of oily fish and though they don't have culinary value, they are one of the most important of all nutritional food supplements. A growing body of evidence shows that these oils can help with some of the behavioural problems that are increasingly common in children. ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and some research by Dr. Alex Richardson at Oxford suggests that they are helpful in Bipolar disorder and possibly even in schizophrenia.

The best oils to use regularly are:

Olive oil – five stars

Ideally this should be cold pressed, extra virgin olive oil packed in tin cans or opaque bottles to keep out the sunlight which causes these delicate oils to oxidise. Virgin olive oil is fine for general cooking but the cheaper forms of olive oil are not ideal for deep frying because they have a low temperature smoking point.

Rape seed (often called canola), walnut and flax seed – four stars.

All these all have very low amounts of saturated fatty acids, substantial mono-unsaturates and a good balance between the Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty acids. Walnut has a great

flavour and is fine for drizzling or dressing but flax seed is a light oil with very little flavour. Neither of these is suitable for high temperature cooking. Rape seed has virtually no flavour but is the best of all oils for frying. No cooking oils should be over-used for deep frying – once or twice is enough.

Coconut oil – three stars

For years this has been one of the villains of the oil and fat story because of its high content of saturated fats but research now shows that the type of saturated fat in coconuts, called medium chain triglycerides, do not raise cholesterol or cause heart disease. Around half the fatty acid is made up of lauric acid which is thought to have antibacterial and antiviral properties. Altogether this makes both the coconut and the oil a valuable ‘functional’ food.

Palm oil – one star

These contain large amounts of saturated fats, little mono-unsaturated and virtually no Omega-3, so they’re best avoided. When buying foods canned in oil, steer clear of products labelled ‘vegetable oil’ – they’re almost certain to contain unhealthy coconut or palm oils.

To protect your heart and circulation and minimise your cancer risk, most people need to reduce their overall consumption of fats. The healthiest option is to reduce saturated and trans fats and use more of the natural, unrefined and, where possible, cold-pressed sources of mono-unsaturated and the best of the polyunsaturated oils.

Don’t go overboard with sunflower seed oil. Although it has been much publicised as a healthy alternative, especially in cooking, don’t use it with abandon. It has more than 60 per cent of Omega-6 and virtually no Omega-3. True, it’s extremely low in saturated fat, but the high levels of Omega-6 mean you should use it sparingly.

Therapeutic Oils

There are a number of oils which are now known to have extremely important therapeutic uses and some will benefit conditions that are either poorly treated or ignored by conventional medicine. The most useful are:

Cod Liver Oil – proven to be helpful in the treatment of osteoarthritis. Not only has anti-inflammatory properties which relieves pain, but helps rebuild damaged cartilage.

Fish Oils – made from the flesh of oily fish like salmon, tuna, herrings etc. These too have a strong anti-inflammatory action and can help relieve the discomfort of many conditions ranging from dry eyes to eczema. Highly protective against heart and circulatory disease and most recently have been shown to benefit both children and adults with behavioural and learning difficulties. The whole range of the autistic spectrum of

disease can benefit to a greater or lesser extent, the strongest effects being shown in the treatment of dyslexia, ADHD and cognitive function.

Starflower and Evening Primrose oils were amongst the earliest to be used therapeutically. Some of the earliest experiments with hyperactive children were done using Evening primrose oil but both oils are also effective in the treatment of eczema. It is even possible that high doses of evening primrose oil may help to prolong periods of remission for some people with early onset multiple sclerosis.

Flax Seed oil – one of the best for the relief of pre-menstrual and menstrual disorders and is also used to help relieve the symptoms in peri- and post-menopausal women.

MorEPA and MorEPA Mini for children are the perfect fish oil supplements.

Barleans Organic Flax Seed Oil and Fortiflax Ground Seeds are without doubt the best quality flax seed products.

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