



Fats and Cholesterol, Explained

Why the right fats are essential, not the enemy

Fat has a bad reputation it does not deserve. Your body needs it to absorb vitamins, protect organs, build cell membranes, make hormones and supply essential fatty acids. The key is choosing the right types, in the right amount.

What fat does

- Stores energy and protects your organs.
- Insulates the body and your nerve cells.
- Helps you absorb and store the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K.
- Builds cell membranes and makes hormones.
- Provides the essential fatty acids omega-3 and omega-6.

Know your fats

Type	Where it is from	The verdict
Unsaturated	Olive and rapeseed oil, nuts, seeds, avocado, oily fish	The healthy fats. Make these your main source.
Saturated	Butter, cheese, fatty and red meat	Fine in moderation. Keep within the limits below.
Trans fats	Some fried foods, biscuits, cakes, pastries	Best avoided. Aim for under 5 g a day.

How much, and what to aim for

- Aim for 20 to 30% of your energy from fat, and no more than 35%.
- Saturated fat: no more than 30 g a day for men, 20 g for women.
- Keep trans fats under 5 g a day.
- Eat at least 2 portions of fish a week, one oily, for essential fats.
- Too little fat (under about 25%) risks deficiency in fat-soluble vitamins, which affects hormones, immunity and skin.

Omega-3, omega-6 and cholesterol

Your body cannot make the essential fatty acids omega-3 and omega-6, so they must come from food. Most of us get plenty of omega-6 from vegetable oils, red meat and eggs, so the priority is more omega-3 from oily fish, flax and seeds, which is linked with better heart health.

Cholesterol is a waxy substance your body needs to build cells, hormones and vitamin D, and your liver makes most of what you need. It travels in the blood as lipoproteins: LDL (often called "bad") and HDL (often called "good"). Favouring unsaturated fats over saturated helps keep the balance healthy.

Fat is not fattening by itself. As with any nutrient, it is excess calories that add body fat. Choose mostly unsaturated fats, keep saturated and trans fats in check, and include oily fish for essential omega-3.

Where to learn more: the NHS, the British Heart Foundation, the British Nutrition Foundation, and the British Dietetic Association (BDA). For advice tailored to you, or if you have raised cholesterol, please speak to your GP.

This leaflet is general nutritional guidance for education only. It is not medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, and it does not replace advice from your GP or a registered dietitian. Always check with a qualified professional before making significant changes, particularly if you have a health condition, are pregnant, or take medication.

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