



British Heart
Foundation

Fats and Oils

Types of fats

All fats are high in calories, so it's important to bear this in mind if you are watching your weight. In terms of your heart, it's important to think about the type of fat you are eating.

The different types of fats in foods are:

- saturated
- unsaturated (unsaturated fats can be either polyunsaturated or monounsaturated)
- trans fats.

All foods have a combination of saturated, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fat. Where possible replace saturated fats with small amounts of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Trans fats are another type of fat found in food which should be avoided.

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How do these fats affect the heart?

- **Saturated fats** are found in foods like butter, lard, ghee, palm oil, coconut oil and dripping, as well as in fatty meats. Too much saturated fat can increase the amount of cholesterol in your blood, increasing your risk of developing cardiovascular disease.
- **Trans fats** occur naturally in small amounts in dairy foods and meat. However, it is the industrially produced trans fats, found in foods such as biscuits, cakes, pastries and deep fried foods, which have a similar effect to saturated fat, as they can increase the amount of cholesterol in your blood. Watch out for 'partially hydrogenated vegetable fat/oil' on the food label, as you can assume it contains trans fats.
- **Monounsaturated fat** can be found in olive oil, rapeseed oil and their spreads, avocados and some nuts such as almonds, brazils and peanuts. These fats can help maintain healthy cholesterol levels.
- **Polyunsaturated fats** include omega 6 (n-6) and omega-3 (n-3). They are termed 'essential' fats as they cannot be made by the body and we need to obtain them from our diet. Omega-6 fats are found in corn, sunflower, safflower and soya bean oils and their spreads.

Omega-3 fats are found in oily fish such as mackerel, kippers, herring, trout, sardines, salmon and fresh tuna. It is the essential fatty acids eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaneic acid (DHA) found in these fish that are healthy for the heart.

Getting the balance right

By reducing the unhealthy saturated and trans fats in our diet and replacing some of this fat with the healthier unsaturated fats we will be getting a better balance for our heart and overall health.

Heart Helpline

Our cardiac nurses and information support officers are here to answer your questions and give you all the heart health information and support you need.

Call us on 0300 330 3311

Similar cost to 01 or 02 numbers.
Lines are open 9am - 5pm Monday to Friday.

This information does not replace the advice that your doctor or nurse may give you. If you are worried about your heart health in any way, contact your GP or local healthcare provider.

How much oily fish should I be having? Supplements and spreads

Aim to eat fish twice a week with at least one portion (140g) being oily fish.

Females that are pregnant, thinking about becoming pregnant or are breast feeding should eat no more than two portions of oily fish a week. Four portions a week is the recommended maximum. This is because oily fish can contain low levels of pollutants that can build up in your body over time and be harmful.

It is also important we choose a range of fish from responsibly managed sources to ensure the sustainability of fish stocks.

fishonline.org provides a helpful guide to help you make an environmentally informed choice about the fish you buy and eat.

What if I don't like/can't eat oily fish?

You can get omega-3 fats from vegetable sources such as flaxseed and rapeseed oil, some nuts and seeds such as walnuts and flax seeds and some omega-3 enriched foods. However, it remains uncertain if the omega-3 in these foods brings the same heart benefits as those in oily fish.

If you take warfarin, check with your doctor before taking any supplements as they can affect blood clotting.

Oily fish in the diet is unlikely to cause a problem.

What about fish oil or fish liver oil supplements?

They are both good sources of omega-3, but fish liver oil has higher levels of the fat soluble vitamins A and D, as it is extracted from the fish liver. Having too much Vitamin A over time can be harmful. The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition advises that if you take supplements containing vitamin A, you should not have more than a total of 1.5mg a day from your food and supplements combined. We do not recommend supplement use as it seems any benefits of fish oils comes from eating the fish rather than in supplement form.

What spreads and oils should I be using?

You should be choosing the healthier mono and polyunsaturated fats instead of saturated fats to help protect your heart. Choose:

- Pure oils – vegetable, rapeseed, olive, sunflower, corn
- Spreads high in unsaturated fat
- 'Buttery' spreads e.g. butterly, butter me up, clover. These use buttermilk not butter fat

Also, think about using alternative cooking methods such as baking, boiling, poaching, microwaving or steaming so you do not need to add extra fat.