

FATS

Fat is a component in food. Some foods, including most fruits and vegetables, have almost no fat. Other foods have plenty of fat. They include nuts, oils, butter, and meats like beef. The name - fat - may make it sound like something you shouldn't eat. But fat is an important part of a healthy diet. And little kids, especially, need a certain amount of fat in their diets so the brain and nervous system develops correctly. That's why toddlers need to drink whole milk, which has more fat, and older kids can drink low-fat or skim milk.

Types of Fat

You might see ads for foods that say they're "low-fat" or "fat-free." Lower-fat diets have been recommended for health and to help people lose weight. But nutrition experts are finding that fats are more complicated and that some kinds of fat are actually good for your health. As a bonus, fat in food helps people feel full, so they don't eat as much. But that doesn't mean a high-fat diet will be good for you. And some fats are better than others. Here are the three major types:

Unsaturated fats: These are found in plant foods and fish. These may be good for heart health. The best of the unsaturated fats are found in olive oil, peanut oil, canola oil, albacore tuna, and salmon.

Saturated fats: These fats are found in meat and other animal products, such as butter, cheese, and all milk except skim. Saturated fats are also in palm and coconut oils, which are often used in commercial baked goods (the kind you buy at the store). Eating too much saturated fat can raise blood cholesterol levels and increase the risk of heart disease.

Trans fats: These fats are found in margarine, especially the sticks. Trans fats are also found in certain foods that you buy at the store or in a restaurant, such as snack foods, baked goods, and fried foods. When you see "hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated" oils on an ingredient list, the food contains trans fats. Like saturated fats, eating too much can raise cholesterol and increase the risk of heart disease.

Why Do We Need Fat?

Dietary fat helps a kid's body grow and develop like it should. Fats fuel the body and help absorb some vitamins. They also are the building blocks of hormones and they insulate nervous system tissue in the body. So fat is not the enemy, but you'll want to choose the right amount - and the right kind - of fat.