

# AHA GUIDELINES: FAT

## *What are the different types of fats?*

There are four major types of fat: saturated, polyunsaturated, monounsaturated, and trans fats. Each type of fat has different chemical structures and physical properties. Saturated and trans fats tend to be solid at room temperature, while polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats tend to be liquid at room temperature. Most foods contain a combination of different types of fats. Foods high in saturated fats include beef, pork, butter, cheese, lard, chicken fat and skin, lamb, and milk and yogurt made from whole or reduced fat milk. Foods high in polyunsaturated fat include corn oil, sunflower oil, soybean oil, walnuts, tofu, soybeans and sunflower seeds. Foods high in monounsaturated fats include olive oil, sesame oil, canola oil, peanut oil, peanuts, and avocados. Foods high in trans fats include commercially deep-fried foods and baked goods including doughnuts, French fries, cakes, pie crusts, biscuits, cookies and crackers. Small amounts of trans fats are found naturally in meat, cheese, and reduced-fat and whole milk. Saturated fats and trans fats increase risk of CVD while polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats decrease risk of CVD.

## *Are any types of saturated fatty acids healthier than the others?*

There are several different types of saturated fatty acids, with very small differences in their effects on CVD. Overall, replacing saturated fat with polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fat lowers LDL cholesterol levels, a primary goal in reducing CVD. The guidelines state that individual saturated fatty acids do not make a significant impact on the overall recommendation to decrease total saturated fat intake.

## *What about coconut oil?*

A recent survey found that 72% of the American public rated coconut oil as a “healthy food” compared with 37% of nutritionists. The disconnect is due to lack of scientific evidence on the health qualities of coconut oil and a large marketing campaign by

coconut oil producers. It’s true that the major saturated fatty acid in coconut oil, lauric acid, doesn’t raise LDL levels as much as other types of saturated fatty acids. However, when coconut oil is compared to vegetable oils high in monounsaturated or polyunsaturated fats, coconut oil raises LDL levels. One review looked at 7 clinical trials that compared the effects on LDL levels with saturated fats, including coconut oil, vs polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. In all 7 trials, coconut oil raised LDL levels. The latest AHA guideline does not support the use of coconut oil.

## *What about trans-fatty acids?*

There are 2 major types of trans fatty acids: naturally occurring found in meat and milk of cattle and sheep, called ruminant trans fatty acids; and produced by chemical and enzymatic action for use in partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, called industrial trans fatty acids. Ruminant trans fatty acids are found in full fat or low-fat milk and yogurt, and also in cheese and butter. Food manufacturers use partially hydrogenated vegetable oil that contains trans fatty acids in a variety of processed foods, including margarines, baked foods, and commercial deep-fried foods. Originally it was thought that only industrial trans fatty acids increased risk of CVD, but emerging evidence is now showing that ruminant trans fatty acids also increase CVD risk.

## *How can I change my food choices to follow AHA guidelines?*

Choose an overall healthy eating pattern that includes plenty of vegetables, fruit, and whole grains. Eat less fat from dairy, including butter, lard, beef tallow, and the tropical oils palm oil, palm kernel and coconut oil to reduce saturated fat. Replace these types of fat with oils high in polyunsaturated fats including corn oil, soybean oil, peanut oil, safflower oil, and sunflower oil; or oils high in monounsaturated fat including olive oil and canola oil.

— By: Lynn Grieger, RDN, CDE, CPT, CHWC