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Facts about Fats

Tracy Olgeaty Gensler, MS, RD

We all remember the fat-free foods craze in the 1990's. Although fat provides 9 calories per gram, more than double that of carbohydrates and protein at 4 calories per gram, we were a bit short-sighted in trying to eliminate them from our diet. Dietary fat serves a very good purpose in our body, it's our chief storage form of energy, it insulates and protects our vital organs and aids in the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins.

Here's a rundown on the types of fats in our diet:

Saturated fat - Foods rich in saturated fat include butter, meats, animal fats, tropical oils and full-fat dairy products. These fats can raise total cholesterol and LDL blood levels (low density lipoprotein).

Unsaturated fat - These fats help maintain good HDL blood levels (high density lipoprotein). These include safflower, sunflower, corn, cottonseed, soybean, olive, peanut and canola oils, seeds, nuts and avocados. Try to get more of these fats in your diet, up to 30% of your total calories.

Hydrogenated or trans fatty acids - Baked goods, cookies, crackers, candy and margarine have the most trans fats. These fats not only can raise total cholesterol and LDL levels, but they can lower healthy HDL levels, making them more dangerous than saturated fats. Many foods are being made without the hydrogenation process, and the package front may boast "no trans fats" or "trans-fat-free."

With the new labeling requirements (January 2006) for listing trans fats on the nutrition facts label, don't be tricked into believing that the label proclamation "trans-fat-free" automatically means that it's a healthful food. Fats lend a certain mouth feel to foods, a delectable crispiness to crackers and cookies and creaminess to candies, margarine and some sweets. It's hard for the manufacturer to eliminate the trans fats and maintain this texture of crispiness and creaminess, but it's not impossible. Beware the products where you find that the manufacturer has replaced trans fats with something else that may be just as unhealthy. Steer clear of ingredients high in saturated fat such as palm or coconut oil (tropical oils) or stearic-acid rich vegetable oil sometimes listed as interesterified vegetable oil which is a fully hydrogenated fat, a saturated fat that doesn't appear to raise, nor does it lower your blood cholesterol level. So check your label before deeming your trans-fat-free food as healthful.

The American Heart Association recommends that you keep most of your fats the unsaturated variety, as they'll help maintain your good blood cholesterol. Hold back on saturated fats to less than 10% of your total calories per day (that's 20 grams on a 2,000 calorie diet) and limit trans fats as much as possible. There's no safe amount.

SIDS: A Silent Killer

Craig M. Wax, DO

Every year thousands of seemingly healthy American babies go to sleep and never wake up. Sudden infant death syndrome, known commonly as SIDS or crib death, is a condition that typically attacks infants as they sleep.

While SIDS is the most common cause of death in babies between the ages of 1 and 12 months, researchers have yet to find the cause.

“SIDS refers to any death of a baby younger than 1 year old without an identified reason,” explains Craig M. Wax, D.O., an osteopathic family physician practicing in Mullica Hil, NJ. “Since it has no known cause, it cannot be predicted or entirely prevented.”

He explains that researchers have found several risk factors that can place infants at increased risk for SIDS. These include:

- Male babies.
- Infants between two weeks and six months of age. This is the most vulnerable time period in the baby’s life.
- Premature babies or infants weighing less than 4.5 pounds.
- African American or American Indian ethnicity.
- Babies born to mothers with placenta previa. Placenta previa occurs when the placenta covers all or part of the cervix during pregnancy.

In addition to these predetermined risk factors, Dr. Wax adds an easily preventable risk factor. “Pregnant mothers and their infants should never be in contact with smoke.”

Smoking cigarettes during pregnancy puts the baby at considerably higher risk for SIDS. The risk is proven to increase with the number of cigarettes smoked. In addition, infants that are exposed to secondhand smoke are harder to wake

from sleep, which makes them susceptible to SIDS.

While there is no proven way to prevent SIDS, Dr. Wax says that there are several steps a parent can take to help their infants sleep safely. The most important precaution for sleeping babies is to place them on their backs. This is the safest sleep position for infants under the age of 1 as the position helps them breathe easier.

“The simple action of training your babies to sleep on their backs can greatly decrease the risk of SIDS,” explains Dr. Wax. “It is equally important to train other childcare providers to lay babies on their backs when they take a nap or go to sleep at night.” “Avoid loose fitting covers, fluffy bed padding and having infant sleep in same bed with an adult.”

“Talk to your physician about SIDS and its prevention.” Say Dr. Wax. He also stresses that while SIDS can cause parents major concern, it is important to understand that SIDS is rare. “Parents should take precautions but should not let fear of this syndrome keep them from enjoying their baby.”

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