Why to Flee from FAT-FREE

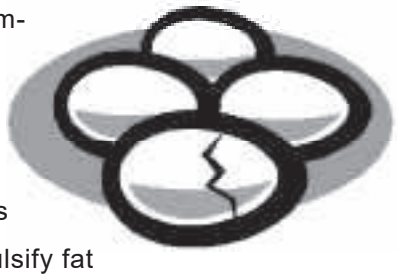
(or, A tub of Margarine is a Freak of Nature...)

By Richard Spencer

Alternative and natural health professionals have known for decades how important the role of proper nutrition is to good health. However, for the average consumer it takes a discerning mind and a little bit of critical thinking to wade through the half-truths and misinformation bombarding us on what we should eat to have a properly balanced diet.

Get Cracking

Before "fat" stepped into the spotlight for its fifteen minutes of fame, cholesterol was the national health obsession. Eggs were particularly targeted as a food which should be avoided because of the high levels of LDL cholesterol they contain. What we weren't informed of, however, is that egg yolk also contains a high concentration of lecithin, which naturally regulates and more than compensates for the high level of LDL cholesterol in eggs. Lecithin's function is to "emulsify fat and prevent cholesterol deposition in the arterial linings, not to mention promote a healthily functioning brain" (Erdmann, 1995). So, if you enjoy eating eggs, get cracking! You can continue to eat them without reservation.



After enduring the media obsession over reduced sodium diets and then the cholesterol and oat bran fetish, the latest nutritional fad involves the preoccupation with eating fat as being the leading cause of cardiovascular disease and obesity.

> *Medical concerns, social pressures based largely on current fashion trends, and effective marketing of low fat products have led many people to believe that the road to good health and long life is fat-free. That viewpoint is not valid. The simple truth is that there are good fats and bad fats and we need to know how to tell the difference. A good diet contains an adequate balanced quantity of unsaturated and saturated fats. Even the much vilified substance, cholesterol, is a necessary element of life (Ewin 1995).*

Fat plays a very important role in maintaining a healthy body; the truth of the matter being that the total elimination of fat from our diets can lead to illness and be as unhealthy as eating too much. "Fats [are] essential components of cell struc-

ture and metabolism - transmitting nerve messages, dictating behavior and participating in millions of reactions that are essential" (Erdmann 1995). Body fat "stores energy, helps protect the kidneys and other organs and serves as a warm blanket of insulation under the skin...Fat molecules aid the absorption of Vitamins A, D, and E from the gut" (Ewin 1995). Deficiencies in dietary fat are "being linked to an increasingly broad cross-section of illnesses including poor mental development, poor vision, dry, scaly skin, and inflammation such as that associated with rheumatic diseases" (Erdmann 1995).

"Fats cause the trouble they do thanks to food processing, refining, unbalanced diets, and sedentary lifestyles" (Erdmann 1995). "By itself though, fat consumption will not elevate blood cholesterol... and is not a direct cause of heart disease" (Hoffer 1978). The consumption of fat only becomes a serious health problem when it is confined with the overconsumption of refined carbohydrates and a diet deficient in fiber.

Although a healthy diet consists of a balanced consumption of fat, the confusion over the difference between a good fat and a bad fat often makes it seem almost simpler not eating any fat at all than risk eating the wrong kind. What is the difference between saturated and unsaturated fat? If cholesterol is necessary to cell function, why is it considered bad?

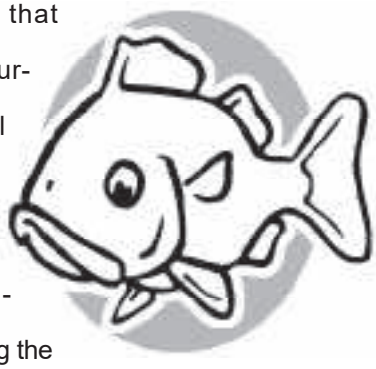
Saturated fat is a dense solid fat like the white fat on beef and lamb. Saturated fat doesn't melt at room temperature (Rudin 1996). Eating saturated fat in itself is not necessarily a health risk. Studies of Inuit cultures have shown that even with a diet consisting primarily of saturated animal fat, there is a very low incidence of those diseases associated with the consumption of saturated fat in the modern Western diet. Heart disease and obesity nowadays is more often caused by the overconsumption of processed carbohydrates than by too much intake of protein and fat (Hoffer 1996). It is this combination of refined carbohydrates and saturated fat which increases blood-cholesterol levels. Ice cream and the infamous invention of the doughnut are two of the best examples of what food looks like when you combine saturated fat and refined carbohydrates.

Unsaturated fat is liquid at room temperature. There are two kinds of unsaturated fat: monounsaturated and polyunsaturated (Rudin 1996). The difference between monounsaturated fat and polyunsaturated fat is that polyunsaturated fat tends to stay liquid at lower temperatures than monounsaturated fat. Unsaturated fat consists of vegetable and fish oils.

Some forms of unsaturated fat are also known as essential fatty acid. Essential fatty acid is "fat which is not manufactured by the body and must be obtained through the food we eat" (Rudin 1996). Essential fatty acids primarily consist of two types of unsaturated fat: Omega-3 fat and Omega-6 fat. Most vegetable oils have high amounts of Omega-6 fat but very little Omega-3. "The body works best" when Omega-6 and Omega-3 fats are combined and consumed in balanced proportions and can "make a big difference in total health" (Rudin 1996) "Because of evidence that too much Omega-6 fat may be a factor in increased cancer, even conservative scientists are

Omega-3 and Crohn's Disease.

Studies are showing that Omega-3 oil has a significant affect on Crohn's disease. Omega-3 fish oil has inflammation-inhibiting properties which are being shown to keep Crohn's disease in remission longer. Also, there is indication that Omega-3 encourages intestinal cell growth and an increase in intestinal mucosal area, giving the stomach the much needed ability to absorb nutrients and combat malabsorption caused by the disease.



now suggesting that we reduce [our intake] of Omega-6 fats and increase our intake of Omega-3 fats..." (Rudin 1996).

Corn, peanut, canola and olive oil are examples of the many vegetable oils consisting primarily of Omega-6 fat. Unfortunately, sources of Omega-3 fat are basically limited to fish oil and flaxseed oil. This explains why there is such a deficiency of Omega-3 fat in the Western diet. Flaxseed oil used to be a popular cooking staple before the advent of massive, industrialized food processing. Flaxseed oil oxidizes very quickly, has a very short shelf life and was therefore replaced by cheaper oils with longer shelf-lives such as corn oil which can be manufactured and shipped in huge quantities.

Just as with the consumption of saturated fat, similarly, the consumption of unsaturated fat is not necessarily unhealthy in itself, but only becomes so, when there is an imbalance of Omega-6 and Omega-3 fats in the diet. A balanced diet of "unsaturated fats lowers blood-cholesterol " (Rudin 1996).

Cholesterol has become a major "'bogey-man' in medical lore" because it is not generally understood that there are actually two kinds of cholesterol which compliment each other if they are properly balanced within the body (Ewin 1995). The reason cholesterol is so important to good health is because it is "the core molecule in steroid hormones, including sex hormones; forms cell membranes; is needed for the formation of bile salts; helps transport fat around the body and forms part of fat soluble vitamins" (Ewin 1995). LDL (low-density lipoproteins) cholesterol has been the focus of the medical establishment because it contains large amounts of saturated fat which is closely linked with the risk of heart disease. If "LDL levels in the blood become too high or...become rancid, the cholesterol tends to stick to the walls of the arteries which causes the arteries to become narrower" (Rudin 1996). HDL (high-density lipoproteins) cholesterol, on the other hand, is "rich in protein and actually appears to strip off the plaque deposits which form on the walls of blood vessels from LDL cholesterol" (Ewin 1995). The problem with cholesterol is that Western diets don't have enough HDL cholesterol to balance the excess LDL cholesterol associated with the overconsumption of saturated fat and Omega-6 unsaturated fat.

Now that we understand what fat and cholesterol is, the challenge remains, what is the most healthy way to eat the fat necessary to a proper diet?

If we want to eat steak and stay healthy like the Inuit do, then we'll have to eliminate or

Trans Fatty Acids

What is a trans fatty acid? Margarine is a trans fatty acid. "Trans fatty acids are bionutritional impostors and are indistinguishable by the body" *(Erdmann, 1995).* Trans fatty acids are the mutant creation of modern food processing. Perfectly good polyunsaturated vegetable oil is hydrogenated under intense pressure and heat so that its normal liquid state is now a solid at room temperature. A tub of margarine is a freak of nature. The body doesn't know what to do with trans fatty acid. It thinks it's a saturated fat, yet tries to use it like an essential fatty acid for brain and nervous system function. Trying to run your brain on trans fatty acids can result in "depression, anxiety...motor skill problems and reduced immune function" *(Erdmann 1995)*.

Trans fatty acids are unredeemably bad. In fact, it has been observed that even wild animals instinctively have enough sense not to touch the stuff. Don't let the propaganda fool you into believing you should eat margarine because butter is too high in fat and cholesterol. At least butter is a real food and won't poison your brain.

reduce considerably our consumption of refined carbohydrates. No more pastas, cakes, pies, pastries, doughnuts or ice cream. Instead, we'll have to incorporate our consumption of saturated fat with a balanced diet of complex carbohydrates which include whole grains, legumes and nuts along with the fiber, vitamins and minerals of lots of fruits and vegetables. Keep in mind that saturated fat in itself is not bad, it is only bad when we mix it with the simple sugars of refined carbohydrates.

Omega-3 fat must be balanced with Omega-6 fat because it is the Omega-3 fat which provides us with the HDL cholesterol necessary to counteract the formation of arterial plaque caused by too much LDL cholesterol.

To achieve the proper balance of Omega-6 and Omega-3 unsaturated fat requires that we find ways of incorporating the limited sources of Omega-3 fat with a good Omega-6 fat. Olive oil is an excellent choice of Omega-6 fat because it contains oleic acid which is known to "increase the incorporation of Omega-3 fat into cell membranes. Unlike other vegetable oils, olive oil beneficially affects cholesterol levels, blood pressure, blood clotting and decreases the risk of developing rheumatoid arthritis" (Barilla 1996). Use olive oil for cooking. Olive oil isn't absorbed by food like other vegetable oils, but instead, coats it and can resist extremely high temperatures before oxidizing. It also adds a rich flavor to food which other vegetable oils cannot.

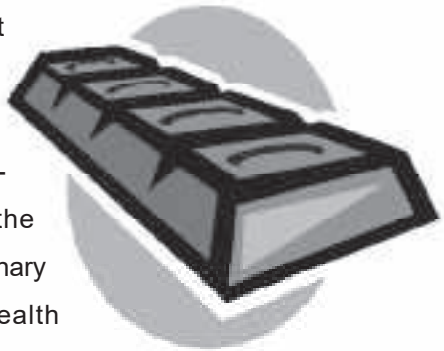
Omega-3 fat can be consumed by increasing our consumption of fatty fish such as mackerel and salmon. Studies have shown that eating fish as little as three times a week can provide the necessary amounts of Omega-3 fat for a balanced diet. Also, using flaxseed oil in cooking and baking is an excellent source of Omega-3. The challenge is to find a good source of flaxseed oil, since it can be difficult, if not impossible to find in supermarkets. A good health food store should carry flaxseed oil. If you are a member of a food co-op, your distributor may have a source for it. You can also get flaxseed into your diet by using the flaxseed itself in baking whole grain breads or sprinkled on salads. Flaxseed can be boiled to make flax tea which, as well as providing Omega-3, can be an excellent way of soothing an upset stomach.

If you hate eating fish and cannot find a viable source of flaxseed oil, the other option for obtaining the necessary balance of Omega-3 fat is to take Omega-3 supplements available in either fish oil or flaxseed oil capsules. Any reputable herbal supplement manufacturer should carry Omega-3 fish and/or flaxseed oil capsules available through your local health food store or directly from the manufacturer itself.

One final thing to think about which is often overlooked is the fact that fat is what makes food taste good. "Low-fat diets are unpalatable for most people. There must be a certain enjoyment in eating which is hard to achieve with the near total avoidance of fats. Consuming little or no fat will leave a person feeling unsatiated [and feeling hungry all the time]... which

Fat Free Chocolate

You may have noticed that some candy bar manufacturers are marketing chocolate as a "fat free" food. The implication being made is that because chocolate is "fat free" it must be healthy. The truth is, chocolate in itself has always been a "fat free" food. Slapping a "fat free" label on something already "fat free" and taking advantage of the current hyper awareness of fat seems rather opportunistic on the part of confectionary companies. Health concerns with candy bars have never been over the fat content of chocolate anyway, but rather the caffeine and sugar combination which provides the quick energy buzz we all know (and unfortunately love) so well.



can generate a continuous low-grade irritability" (Hoffer 1996). Eating is a necessity which should be a pleasure, not a chore, and eating fat in moderation and balance will allow us to enjoy our food without compromising our health.

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