

natural health

Fat gets a lot of bad press; high fat diets are linked with hardening of the arteries, a component of cardio-vascular disease, which is the biggest killer in the western world.

Fat is also implicated as a risk factor for some cancers, the second biggest killer in the western world. As if all that weren't enough to justify the case against fat, it can also make you fat! But does fat have no redeeming features? Is it a totally corrupt and despicable character? Well not quite.

Humans generally find the taste of food containing fats rather appealing, and before you rush to proclaim that neat lard with a drizzle of dripping isn't your favourite dish, just consider what other foods contain significant amounts of fat. A joint of beef, or particularly a leg of lamb are sources of fat, as are all dishes with rich sauces, fluffy cakes, biscuits, crisps, any sort of eggs but particularly fried, oily fish and all fried fish, chips, salad dressings made with oil, potatoes served with melting butter, avocados, any dish containing cheese, oh and don't forget strawberries and cream. There are lots more but we can't hog the whole magazine.

We like fat because it is a concentrated source of energy. Weight for weight, fat contains twice as many calories (a unit of energy remember) as carbohydrates or proteins. When you are looking to get enough energy to survive through the day, then fat becomes a valuable prize. If on the other hand you only need enough energy to reach the TV remote on the arm of your chair, then fat can become something of a problem.

In addition to its use as a fuel, we use fat as "electrical insulation" covering the "wiring" of our nervous system, in fact our brains are mostly fat. Fat is also great at heat insulation, keeping us warm on cold winter nights, and we use it as protective padding around delicate organs such as our kidneys. But it is the small scale applications of fat that are more important to us in our modern lives, where food is plentiful and central heating common.

Each of our body's cells are surrounded by a clever membrane, that is stiff enough to keep all the essential cell contents in captivity, yet soft enough to allow our cells to exchange nutrients, wastes and chemical messengers with the rest of the body. In order for the membrane to perform this balancing act of not being too hard nosed, while at the same time not being a push over, it has to contain the right balance of "fatty acids", the building blocks of fats.

If our diet doesn't supply adequate amounts and an appropriate balance of these fatty acids, then the function of these membranes, and hence the function of our cells, can suffer. Because this effects all of our cells, it is easy to see why getting the fat question wrong can have such severe and widespread impacts on our health. Next time I'll look at how to identify the good guys from the bad.



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Fats: friend or foe?

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