Part of being healthy involves making choices. This includes choosing to consume fats in foods that are healthier ones and eating them in moderation.

Fat in food is considered a nutrient. It is needed for absorption of fat-soluble vitamins such as Vitamins A, D and K and the carotenoids. Although carbohydrates are the ideal source of energy, fat from foods also provides energy for the body. This energy is measured in calories.

But not all fats are created equal. For example, the human body can convert saturated and trans fats to cholesterol. For this reason, getting too much is not a good thing, so it is important to limit intake of these. Animal sources of fat contain saturated fat. Saturated fat is found in the fat on meats such as beef, chicken and pork, in milk and milk products including butter and cheese, and in lard. Saturated fat, as well as trans fat, tends to be solid at room temperature. Trans fat is made by processing liquid forms of fat, making it just enough different chemically to make it react differently in the body. Saturated fat is also present in a significant proportion in coconut, palm and palm kernel oils, ranging from 52-92%.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are foods that contain linoleic acid, one of many fatty acids that are considered the building blocks of fat. This nutrient is needed for healthy skin. Also, according to a recent study reported in the February 2015 issue of Tufts Health and Nutrition Letter, “People who swap 5% of the calories they consume from saturated fat sources... with foods containing linoleic acid – the main polyunsaturated fat found in vegetable oil, nuts and seeds – was associated with a 9% lower risk of coronary heart disease events.” This switch was also “associated with a 13% lower coronary heart disease mortality risk.”

Notice though that this report is not saying 'linoleic acid is good for you so eat all you want.' Whether it is saturated, trans or unsaturated like linoleic acid, fat provides twice as many calories as carbohydrates or protein. As such, it is key to remember that fat in any form is to consumed sparingly as part of a healthy eating plan.

For more information on healthier fat options or any other topic, contact me, Janet Hackert, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.

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