Mistaken about Fats

By ACSH Staff — September 26, 2002

Some of the most negative and unfounded criticisms of food single out animal fats and, by inference, all products that contain them. Such criticisms typically make vague reference to heart disease, cancer, or both, and they are often repeated by nutritionists and health care specialists writing for syndicated columns that are read by thousands of people. Such communications are a disservice to readers for several reasons.

First, one gets the impression from such anti-fat articles that vegetable fats and oils because they usually are not mentioned play no part in the aforementioned diseases. This is not true. The pro-vegetable implication is often amplified by an accompanying strong endorsement of eating fruits and vegetables sound advice taken by itself, but misleading in this context.

Second, even lumping all animal fats together is a mistake. The common edible animal fats include those of cattle, sheep, pigs, poultry, fish, milk, and eggs. Not only are there large compositional variations between those fats, there are important differences in fat content depending on what the individual animal was fed.

Many of the foods we consume are highly processed and contain mixtures of fats. Such foods, particularly vegetable oils, may have had their compositions altered by hydrogenation or fractionations of one kind or another. There is a wealth of new knowledge emerging about the healthfulness of individual fatty acids that make up both animal and vegetable fats and oils. In light of this detailed information, common generalizations such as "the evidence linking animal fats to..." are simply inappropriate and misleading.

Note also that there is always the potential for misleading generalizations in vague statements about "evidence that links..." How much of what kind of evidence, we should ask? Linked how, and to what degree (by what cause and with what effect?)? And linked to how many people, in a total sample of what size and kind?

Those of us who communicate with the public about health matters shouldn't simplify our writing about foods to the point that the truth vanishes especially not in the interest of underscoring some vague scare statement. Many people are getting along just fine with reasonable amounts of the various animal fats in their diets, and we do a disservice by frightening them.

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Responses:
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I'm sure this article is both well intentioned and very probably correct, but it barely dips into the subject. If individual fatty acids are important, which ones are they (apart from omega 3 long-chain fatty acids, which always seem to get good

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