

Saturated with Food Advice

By ACSH Staff — March 11, 2004

For the past four or five years a clarion call to eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains has been heard throughout the U. S. Often it is coupled with "and avoid saturated fat" or "avoid dairy and meat because of saturated fat." All versions of the call, one way or another, are urging us to reduce meat and milk products in our diets. No doubt one purpose of the fruit-and-vegetable cry is to help deal with the obesity epidemic, a very worthy objective, but it doesn't seem to be working. Americans are reported to be getting fatter all the time. The simplistic admonition to eat more vegetables should stop.

Both meat and milk products have long been recognized as strong contributors to a healthy, balanced diet. The idea that consumption of milk in its many processed forms should be reduced or halted entirely seems particularly misguided. It delivers more vitamins, minerals, macronutrients, and bioactive substances in significant amounts than any other single food. If the objective is to fight obesity, there are studies clearly demonstrating the capacity of milk in various forms to suppress weight gain and contribute to weight-reduction diets. The obesity problem is mainly due to overeating and underexercising, not consumption in reasonable amounts of some particular food.

As to saturated fat, yes, milk and milk products, with the exception of those processed to be fat-free, contain saturated fat. There are several reasons why this should alarm no one. First, saturated fat has never been proven to cause any human disease. Second, its association with heart disease does not hold for milk. Further, growing knowledge of heart disease reveals an ever more complicated picture pointing to inflammation in the walls of coronary (heart) arteries as the cause of heart attacks. The proposed role of saturated fat is an increase in the LDL (bad cholesterol) content of blood. This LDL is presumed to deposit cholesterol in the walls of coronary arteries, which may lead to their narrowing and occlusion. However, a large form of LDL is now considered beneficial. Perhaps we should reserve judgement on saturated-fat-induced LDLs until we know more.

Remember that the egg was an early casualty of the cholesterol war. It took about forty years of progressing science and common sense to restore the good name of that versatile, highly nutritious food. (See ACSH's report and our *What's the Story* pamphlet on the role of eggs in the diet.)

There is a positive side to saturated fat. Many studies have established that it suppresses the blood level of lipoprotein (a), a risk factor for heart attacks and strokes. Other studies have shown clearly that intake of saturated fat in place of carbohydrate increases the amount of HDL (good cholesterol) in the blood. Additional positive findings suggest that saturated fat helps fight infections and promotes bone health. There also is a tendency for saturated fatty acids and

calcium to regulate each other's digestive absorption through formation of insoluble soaps. No one seems to recognize that a cost versus benefit consideration regarding saturated fats, especially as they exist in various foods, is in order. Rather than intimidate everyone and destroy business for major segments of the food industry, health care specialists and the media ought to specify what segments of the population need to worry about saturated fats and how big or small a relative risk it is.

Oversimplifying health information for public consumption can degrade, if not destroy, the truth and produce unwanted consequences. I suggest we proceed with greater caution.

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