

Fat chance that saturated fat causes heart disease

By ACSH Staff — February 14, 2012

Given that the media often presents us with conflicting diet and health information, one would think it makes sense to turn to expert advisory committees for an explanation of what the scientific evidence really shows. However, [a recent study](#) [1] in the journal *Nutrition* finds that that is not always the case. According to a researcher from the Netherlands, even leading American and European advisory committees have misrepresented the scientific evidence for the link between saturated fat and cardiovascular disease.

Robert Hoenselaar, a student of nutrition and dietetics at a Dutch university, analyzed three such advisory committee reports and the scientific studies that they referenced, supplementing these sources with related results that were not included in the reports. Disconcertingly, Hoenselaar found that the advisory committee reports did not in fact accurately reflect the scientific data on the relationship between consumption of saturated fat and cardiovascular disease. All three reports excluded, apparently arbitrarily, a variety of meta-analyses that were available at the time and two reports actually misrepresented the conclusions of some of the studies they reported on. Consequently, the stated conclusions of these studies are not supported by the actual data contained within them, nor did they include all the relevant data.

While the advisory reports in question noted that saturated fat consumption increases LDL (bad) cholesterol, which is in turn linked to a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, they systematically ignored the fact that a higher level of HDL (good) cholesterol is closely linked to a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease. Dr. Stan Young, a statistician and ACSH advisor, notes that this detail is a critical omission: The thing to keep in mind is that there are multiple factors [that affect the risk of cardiovascular disease]; picking just one or another is unlikely to give the correct answer.

Finally, Hoenselaar concluded that the results of several meta-analyses suggest that lowering one's consumption of saturated fat would not in fact have any beneficial effect on cardiovascular disease. The advisory committees, however, ignored the data and concluded the opposite: They continuously warn the public to decrease their saturated fat intake in order to improve cardiovascular health.

This turns the recommendation about the dangers of saturated fat intake on its head, says ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava. Apparently, these advisory committees did not include all of the scientific evidence according to this report, they picked and chose studies that are not representative, and even misinterpreted the results. She points out that the new finding supports the sensible approach of choosing a varied diet that includes both animal- and plant-based foods, as opposed to worrying to excess about individual ingredients.

As ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan observes, The evidence showing a link between saturated fat and cardiovascular disease is just not there. But she worries that a study like this may not get the

news coverage it deserves. It s difficult to change conventional wisdom, she says. People are really wedded to the idea that saturated fat is dangerous.

ACSH s Dr. Gilbert Ross doesn t find the news surprising. When I was in practice, he says, I had no luck trying to get patients cholesterol levels down with diet alone. Back then, we were told to restrict eggs and milk. We know better now and thank heaven (and Big Pharma) for statins!

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[1] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22208554>