Lower Fat and Cholesterol to Reduce Risk of Coronary Heart Disease

Consuming too much saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol poses risks for coronary heart disease (CHD). These raise low-density lipoprotein, or “bad” cholesterol, levels causing the risks for CHD to increase. As of this past January, food labels began providing consumers with the amount of all three—saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol—in foods.

What is Trans Fat?
Trans fat is made when liquid oils are made into solid fats. Manufacturers add hydrogen to vegetable oil (a process called hydrogenation) to increase the shelf life and flavor stability of foods containing these fats. Trans fats are found in vegetable shortenings, some margarines, crackers, cookies, snack foods and other foods made with or fried in partially hydrogenated oils. A small amount of trans fat is found naturally, primarily in dairy products, some meat and other animal-based foods.

All Fats are NOT the Same
Fat is a major source of energy for the body and aids in the absorption of vitamins A, D, E and K and carotenoids. When eaten in moderation, fat is important for proper growth, development and maintenance of good health. Fat also provides taste, consistency and stability to our foods and provides a feeling of fullness. Fats are an especially important source of calories and nutrients for infants and toddlers (up to 2 years of age).

Unsaturated fats (monounsaturated and polyunsaturated) are beneficial when consumed in moderation. Saturated and trans fats raise low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol levels in the blood, contributing to heart disease. In addition, trans fats lower high density lipoprotein, or “good,” cholesterol in the blood. Dietary cholesterol also contributes to heart disease. Therefore, selecting foods low in saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol is recommended.

Should “Bad” Fats and Cholesterol be Eliminated?
Completely eliminating saturated fat, trans fat or cholesterol from the diet is not practical because they are unavoidable in ordinary diets. In addition, this would require extraordinary dietary changes that could cause an inadequate intake of some nutrients and create health risks. Instead, read the Nutrition Facts panel to help select foods lower in “bad” fats and cholesterol.

Putting the Label to Work for You
Compare similar foods and choose the food with the lower combined saturated and trans fats and the lower amount of cholesterol. Keep in mind that 5 percent of the daily value (%DV) or less is low and 20 percent or more is high. (There is no %DV for trans fat).

If a product does not list trans fat on the label, it could still contain trans fat. Foods containing less than 0.5 gram can list zero trans fat on the Nutrition Facts panel. To determine if a food contains trans fat if it is not identified on the label, check the ingredient list. The food contains trans fat if the ingredient list includes any of these words:

- Shortening
- Partially hydrogenated vegetable oil
- Hydrogenated vegetable oil

Ingredients are listed in descending order of amount; smaller amounts are present when the ingredient is close to the end of the list.

Practical tips for Lowering Fat and Cholesterol

- Replace saturated fat and trans fat in your diet with unsaturated fats. These fats do not raise LDL cholesterol levels and have health benefits when eaten in moderation. Unsaturated fats include olive, canola, soybean, corn and sunflower oils and foods like nuts and fish.

- Choose vegetable oils and soft margarines more often because the amounts of saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol are lower than the amounts in solid shortenings, hard margarines and animal fats (including butter).

- Consider fish. Most fish are lower in saturated fat than meat.

- Choose lean meats. Remove skin from poultry, and trim visible fat from meats.

- Keep fried foods to a minimum.