

DIET

Saturated fats no longer the true enemy, experts say

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Saturated fats are not the enemy. But processed foods are, according to a new policy statement from the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada.

On Thursday, the foundation released a new policy statement that questions conventional wisdom about the dangers of saturated fats on the heart.

Saturated fat is found naturally in red meat, dairy products and certain oils, such as palm oil. For years, a debate has raged over whether saturated fat contributes to poor heart health. Many nutrition and dietary experts, including the American Heart Association, warn that saturated fats can raise the risk of cardiovascular disease and urge people to limit consumption of dairy, red meat and fried, processed food.

But recently, more evidence has emerged that calls that relationship into question. Although more work needs to be done to fully understand how saturated fats affect long-term health, the Heart and Stroke Foundation said it no longer makes sense to single it out. Instead, Canadians need to focus on eating fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, meat and other products that have not been processed, said Manuel Arango, director of health policy at the Heart and Stroke Foundation. There is no question that fried and processed foods contribute to poor long-term health, he said.

The organization is also urging Canadians to stop fixating on one particular aspect of food – such as fat, sodium, calories, sugar – and instead focus on eating unprocessed, whole foods. Also steer clear of products advertised as low fat because, chances are, they are loaded with other things you don't want, such as calories, sodium or other additives, according to the association.

"That low fat claim could potentially be quite misleading," Arango said.

Russell de Souza, a nutrition epidemiologist at McMaster University in Hamilton, recently completed a study that found saturated fat is not linked to stroke, type 2 diabetes, heart disease or death.

The study, published last month in the British Medical Journal, did find a clear relationship between trans fats, which are often found in processed or fried foods, and heart health problems.

In the past, de Souza said, studies found that people who ate lower levels of saturated fats tended to have better heart health.

But if you examined their food choices, those people chose to eat more plant-based foods that are high in antioxidants and important nutrients, which could have contributed to their heart health.

The research has never clearly shown that saturated fats are the cause of heart health problems. Now, the tide appears to be turning.

"Maybe butter is not as bad as we thought it was before," Arango said.

"At the end of the day, our bottom line is we need this balanced diet and you don't have to worry as much about intake of saturated fat."

That doesn't mean loading up on butter and steak is a good idea. Rather, the Heart and Stroke Foundation is advocating for moderation and choosing whole foods instead of processed ones.

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