

BRITISH SWIMMING WORLD CLASS PROGRAMME

FACT SHEET

The Basics Fats

Many athletes think they must avoid all fats. However, fat also contributes to the health and performance of athletes. Fat, along with carbohydrate, is an important fuel for prolonged exercise and some fat is required for optimal health.

A small amount of dietary fat is needed for normal bodily functions and complete fat restriction can hinder performance. Fat soluble vitamins A, D, E and K are dependent on fat for absorption and transportation in the body. Individuals who completely eliminate fat from the diet in the understanding they are being 'healthy' cannot absorb these vitamins and are at risk of developing deficiencies. Fat also has a role as an insulator, is needed for some compounds such as cholesterol and for cell membrane structure.



So what counts as high-fat and low-fat?

- High: more than 20g of fat per 100g serving.
- Low: 3g of fat or less per 100g.

1

¹ For more information consult 'Fat: The Facts' pages on NHS choices, www.nhs.uk/livewell

Types of dietary fats

There are two main types of fat found in food: saturated and unsaturated. As part of a healthy diet you should try and cut down on saturated fat and eat foods that are rich in unsaturated fat.

Saturated fats:

- Too much saturated fat has been linked to health problems such as high cholesterol and heart disease. Therefore consumption of saturated fats should be limited to less than 10% of daily calorific intake.
- Saturated fats are primarily found in animal sources like meat, egg yolks, cheese and butter.

Unsaturated fats

- Unsaturated fats, including monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, actually have health benefits and can help lower cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease but should still only be eaten in moderate amounts.
- Unsaturated fats are typically found in plant sources such as avocados, fish, almonds, soya beans and flaxseed. Snacking on or including these in meals is a good way of eating more foods rich in unsaturated fats.



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Essential fatty acids (EFA)

Dietary fat also provides essential fatty acids (EFA). These are polyunsaturated fatty acids that cannot be synthesised by the body but play an important role supporting the cardiovascular, reproductive, immune and nervous systems. These include Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids.

- Fish oils are the best sources of Omega 3 including eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). These are anti-inflammatory and help protect against some diseases.
- Omega 6 fatty acids have the opposite effect; too many can increase inflammation, especially after high intensity exercise.
- Most diets contain too much Omega 6, instead of equal amounts of Omega 3 and Omega 6.
- Increase the amount of Omega 3's, found in oily fish such as mackerel and salmon, and reduce the amount of Omega 6's in your diet by eating a diet lower in saturated fats and replacing oils such as sunflower and soy bean for olive and canola oil instead.

How much fat should I eat?

Fat should still only make up the smallest percentage of your diet after carbohydrates and protein. Carbohydrates and proteins are more efficient fuel sources and are more important for maximising performance.

Excess fat in your diet can lead to storage of extra body fat and can also mean insufficient carbohydrate intake. This can result in decreased endurance, speed, agility and flexibility and overall performance.

Fat can also cause discomfort and indigestion during exercise. Therefore it is important to think about the timing, type and amount of fat consumption.



Practical tips for reducing your saturated fat intake

At home:

- Remove any fat from meat and choose lean options (e.g. lean mince, back bacon).
- Eggs: Prepare eggs without oil or butter. Poach, boil or dry fry your eggs.
- Pasta: try a tomato sauce, instead of creamy or cheesy sauces.
- Grill, bake, poach or steam food rather than frying or roasting.
- Choose vinaigrette based (with healthy oils) for salad dressing rather than regular dressing like mayonnaise

Out and about:

- Curry: go for a dry or tomato based dish, such as tandoori or madras, instead of a creamy curry such as korma, passanda or massala.
- Choose plain boiled rice and chapatti instead of pilau rice and a naan.
- Chinese take away: choose a lower-fat dish, such as steamed fish or chicken chop suey.
- Thai: try a stir-fried or steamed dish containing chicken, fish or vegetables. Watch out for curries that contain coconut milk, which is high in saturated fat.