



Get the facts on fat, cholesterol and heart health

And how barley fits into this picture ... Health and nutrition professionals say a heart-healthy diet should include plenty of fiber and limited amounts of saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol. What's the connection between heart disease and foods containing fiber, fat and cholesterol? What foods should be included in a heart-healthy diet and which should be limited? Here's a quick run-down on the facts:

Saturated fat

Saturated fat is found in animal products such as fatty cuts of meat, chicken skin, full-fat dairy products (whole milk, butter, cream, cheese) and in tropical vegetable oils such as palm, palm kernel and coconut oil.

Trans fat

This is a type of fat that is formed when vegetable oil is hardened through a process called hydrogenation. The process is used to prolong the shelf life of foods, give them shape and make them more solid. Trans fat is found in vegetable shortening, hard or stick margarine, crackers, cookies, baked goods, fried foods, salad dressings and other processed foods made with partially hydrogenated vegetable oils. Small amounts of trans fat also occur naturally in some animal products such as milk products, beef and lamb.

Cholesterol

Foods that are typically high in cholesterol include organ meats such as liver, egg yolks, shrimp, and full-fat dairy products.

The fat-cholesterol-heart disease connection

Saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol in the diet raise the level of LDL cholesterol (often called "bad" cholesterol) in the blood. According to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, Americans consume 4 to 5 times as much saturated fat as trans fat. But it's important that consumers are aware of all three – saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol – in the foods they consume in order to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease.

Limit intake of fat, cholesterol

How much fat and cholesterol should be included in a healthful diet? The Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010 say that our total fat intake should be between 20 to 35 percent of total calories consumed, with most fats coming from sources of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats such as fish, nuts and vegetable oils. The Guidelines say we should consume less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat and less than 300 milligrams a day of cholesterol. The Guidelines recommend keeping trans fat consumption as low as possible.

What about the fiber-cholesterol connection?

Fiber is a substance that comes from plants and cannot be digested or absorbed by the human body. The type of fiber that we eat is called dietary fiber. There are two main types of dietary fiber, soluble and insoluble. Both are important for maintaining good health and should be included in foods we eat every day.

Soluble fiber promotes heart health

Soluble fiber has been found to be effective in lowering blood cholesterol. This type of fiber mixes with liquid and binds to fatty substances to help remove them from the body. Soluble fiber has also been found to be beneficial in slowing the absorption of sugar, which, for people with diabetes, may help decrease the need for insulin. Soluble fiber may also help reduce the risk for developing type 2 or non-insulin-dependent diabetes.

Insoluble fiber effective in reducing cancer risk

Insoluble fiber is the type of fiber that helps the body maintain regular bowel function. Studies show that insoluble fiber may be beneficial in lowering the risk for certain cancers such as colon cancer.

Experts recommend fiber every day

Health and nutrition professionals recommend eating 25 to 38 grams of dietary fiber (including both soluble and insoluble) every day. To do that, the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010 recommend eating plenty of grains, fruits and vegetables, which are considered excellent sources for fiber. The Guidelines recommend eating about 2 cups of fruit and 2-1/2 cups of vegetables every day for a reference 2,000-calorie intake. The Guidelines also recommend eating at least 6 servings of grain products every day with at least 3 of those servings coming from whole grain products.

Is barley a good fiber choice?

Yes! Barley is an excellent choice when it comes to adding both soluble and insoluble fiber to the diet. Our favorite grain compares favorably to other grains in total dietary fiber content. For example, a 1/2-cup serving of cooked pearl barley contains 3 grams of total dietary fiber. In comparison, a 1/2-cup serving of cooked long-grain brown rice contains 1.75 grams dietary fiber. A 1/2 -cup serving of cooked white medium-grain rice contains less than 1 gram of dietary fiber.

Choose barley for your heart health

Barley's soluble fiber content, along with its naturally low-fat content and zero cholesterol make this grain a wise choice for heart-smart dining. Because barley is available in several forms (pearled, flour and flakes), it may be used in many different recipes and for all eating occasions – breakfast, lunch and dinner. For some delicious ideas, visit www.barleyfoods.org and click on the Recipes tab.