

Fats and Oils -- Has Science Gone Astray?

By Dr. Marc Halpern, D.C.,C.A.S.,P.K.S., (Ayurvedacharya)

Fats, the long time enemy of those who want to prevent heart disease, is getting a second look in light of new evidence that reveals that fats may play an important role in the prevention of some cancers. Recent research published in the British Medical Journal has revealed that while low levels of fats protect us against heart disease, they may also increase our susceptibility to certain kinds of cancers. Another study revealed that milk fats contain substances protective toward our bodies which prevent some cancers from forming. In light of this new research, it is important that each person reassess their attitudes toward fats and oils.

Cardiovascular disease (CVD: heart disease and strokes) is the number one killer in the United States. Each year it kills more than twice the number of people as all cancers combined. Modern methods of nutrition have focused on the prevention of this group of diseases through diet and exercise. A diet low in saturated fats and cholesterol has been the cornerstone of prevention. Repeated studies have concluded that lower blood cholesterol levels and triglycerides (circulating fats) reduce the incidence of these conditions. In addition, it has been shown that exercise also lowers their incidence in part through raising HDL and Lowering LDL. (HDL and LDL are often called good and bad fats; they are proteins that carry fat within the body).

The new research showing that lower fat levels may increase the incidence of some cancers should not come as a great surprise. Fat has always been known to play an important role in the body, particularly in the production of all cell membranes, many hormones, the sheaths that surround nerves, and the oils that keep our skin healthy. Those who receive too little fat in their diet are more likely to suffer from a multitude of conditions including hormonal imbalances, brittle hair and nails, dry skin and Raynaud's disease (cold, painful sensations in the fingers, toes, ears and nose due to vasospasm of the small vessels.).

It would be wrong to conclude that fat is either absolutely good for us or absolutely bad for us. Perhaps this is why there has been so much confusion and disagreement among the experts. Effective arguments can be made for either point of view. Dean Ornate, MD, well received as an expert in nutrition, advocates very low fat diets as being optimal for preventing and reversing, heart disease. Another recognized expert, Robert Atkins, MD, blames heart disease on high carbohydrate diets and advocates low carbohydrate, high protein diets. He does not recommend restricting fat. Could both experts be right? Perhaps, future research will try to answer an as yet, unasked question. Could higher levels of fat be good for some people and harmful for others? If so, who would fall into each category?

Ayurveda, the traditional healing system from India, is based upon the understanding that each person is an individual with unique nutritional needs. Ayurveda teaches that those people of vata nature, who are lighter, thin boned, have narrow faces and thin, scanty hair, dry skin and a nervous or anxious nature benefit from extra fats and oils in their diet. In fact, according to Ayurveda, the oils reduce their risk of cardiovascular disease. Meanwhile, those of a more pitta nature, who have a moderate build, focused, intense, deep set eyes and early graying of the hair and those of kapha nature (stocky, dense bones, short necks, round faces, generally calm and relaxed) become unhealthy when exposed to too much fat. Those of a kapha nature are understood to be the most susceptible to traditional risk factors of cardiovascular disease. Increased body weight is a known risk factor of CVD and kapha individuals having a slower metabolism are often overweight.

With all of this conflicting information, what is a person to do? I am reminded of the wise words of the great rishi (mystic) Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. In summary he says, "...take only those foods which are pure and produce a clear mind. Take them all in moderation." Moderation is the best choice for the general community.

If you are very thin, do not fear fats, they are your friend. As Ayurveda teaches, they may reduce your risk of CVD and also of other conditions such as anxiety. It is best to take healthy fats from naturally occurring sources such as vegetable oils, nuts, milk and eggs. Oils such as olive, sesame and ghee are the best as they are somewhat heavy oils. They have a moderate percentage of saturated fats and are high in mono-unsaturated fats. If you are heavy, reduce your intake of fats. Not only will they increase your risk of CVD but also of diabetes. If you do take oils, use polyunsaturated oils such as safflower, they are lighter. Everyone should avoid excessive un-natural fats such as those from deep fried foods and oils which are old and rancid. For specific individualized dietary plans, see a Clinical Ayurvedic Specialist. And, remember, to further reduce your risk of cardiovascular, avoid smoking, exercise regularly, relax often and have your blood pressure checked regularly.

Beware of modern science. There is a tendency to leap into the current theories being promoted as though they express the whole truth. Modern science is outdated every ten years, replaced by newer, still incomplete information. It was, after all, "modern science" that once told us that babies would thrive more on bottled milk than on breast milk, that the chemical DES was safe for pregnant woman, that marijuana has no useful medical value and that you can safely lose weight by taking the drug phen - phen. Modern science still tells us that pesticides in reasonable doses are safe.

Use common sense and intuition. All great traditional healing sciences (Native American, Ayurvedic, Chinese) focus on principles of truth, based in spirit, tested

though time and which stand eternal. Moderation is the safest approach unless a person is guided by an expert in the field.

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