Some Unexpected Risks of LOW-FAIT DIETS

By Josh Axe

Fatty acids are an essential nutrient and one of the primary energy sources for the body. They also play a big role in weight management, absorbing nutrients, maintaining healthy skin and hair, regulating body temperature, supporting immune function, insulating internal organs, and balancing hormones.

Here are seven risks of a low-fat diet:

1. Poor Brain Function

The brain is largely made up of fat and requires a steady stream of fatty acids to perform optimally. There especially seems to be a special protective factor when it comes to cholesterol and the brain. Cholesterol has an important role as a critical brain nutrient, essential to the function of neurons and neurotransmitter, so despite what most people think, low cholesterol levels can be worse (high ones are bad)

The brain basically requires a high amount of cholesterol as a source of fuel or energy, but since brain neurons cannot generate significant amounts of cholesterol on their own, we must get our required cholesterol from our diets to feed our brain and remain “sharp.” Research shows that people who have the highest cholesterol level intakes usually perform better on cognitive tests than those with lower levels.

This means that a major low-fat diet risk includes poor job performance, low energy changes in your mood, “brain fog,” and so on. This is why some of the best brain foods to boost focus and memory actually have high levels of healthy fats.

2. Compromised Heart Health

While we’ve been told the opposite for many years, research continues to confirm that heart disease including coronary artery disease, the leading cause of heart attack likely has much more to do with inflammation—whether it’s from the most diseases—than from high fat or cholesterol intake.

This means that an inflammatory diet including lots of sugar, refined carbs, low-quality proteins and processed vegetable oils is actually more threatening to your heart than a diet high in fat—especially saturated fat. It’s much more beneficial for your heart to eat anti-inflammatory foods that contain healthy fats.

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3. Hormone Imbalances

Eating too much fat is one of the most important things you can do to balance hormones naturally. Cholesterol and other fats play a fundamental part in building cellular membranes and hormones.

Certain kinds of fats, including cholesterol, also act like anti-oxidants and precursors to some important brain-supporting molecules and neurotransmitter. These include vitamin D, which actually acts more like a hormone in the body than a vitamin along with other hormones like testosterone and estrogen.

One scary low-fat diet risk is an increased risk for infertility and other hormonal issues in women. Some studies have found that low-fat diets raise the risk of menstrual problems and difficulty getting pregnant.

4. Weight Gain and Overseating

Look at any of the recent research involving weight gain for low-fat and intake, and you’ll quickly realize the established relationship between fats intake, your hormones, and weight fluctuations. We know that many people who go “low-fat” tend to gain back all the weight shortly after. Why does this happen?

One explanation is that weight loss diets biological adaptations that result in a decrease in energy expenditure (adaptive thermoregulation) and an increase in hunger, both of which promote weight regain. But certain studies have found that a higher-fat diet with lower carbs can help prevent this from happening.

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5. Higher Risk of Inflammation, Resistance and Diabetes

Clinical studies have shown that excess weight gain and insulin (or blood sugar control) are highly correlated, but we know that eating plenty of healthy fats is one of the keys to controlling insulin.

Insulin is sometimes called our “fat storing hormone.” It helps shuttle glucose into our cells, which means our blood sugar will fall a carbohydrate or sugar—containing meal.

It appears that different types of fat have different effects on insulin action. Given the importance of insulin resistance in the development of diabetes and heart disease, establishing appropriate levels of fat in the diet is an important clinical goal for lowering the “diabetes” epidemics.

Studies that have examined the effect of various diets with different levels of fat are revealing that lower-fat, higher-carb diets might pose a higher risk for insulin-resistance (and weight gain).

Diets that are higher in fat tend to be lower in carbohydrates and sugar, which is beneficial for diabetes prevention.

6. Higher Risk for Depression and Anxiety

Fatty acids play an important role in brain functions that control mood, so eating enough healthy fats sources is one key to follow an anti-depression diet. Some neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and dopamine, are synthesized from fatty acids, suggesting that low levels of dietary fats from fatty fish can affect the central nervous system.

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7. Gut-Derived Problems

Higher-fat, high-fiber diets are now correlated with a healthier gut environment, or microbiome. A diet with plenty of naturally occurring fatty acids and nutrients supplies the building blocks needed to nourish not only a healthy gut, but also a healthy brain, which are both very connected.

A diet that keeps blood sugar balanced keeps gut bacteria balanced, too. So we can see eating plenty of high-fiber plant foods (especially all vegetables) along with healthy fats feeds the good bacteria in the gut and produces the right balance needed to lower inflammation.

One of the benefits of coconut oil, it can be especially protective over gut health and gut bacteria, but it does vary from person to person. It’s important to do an elimination diet with chronic digestive issues.

Dr. Josh Axe, DNM, NCS, is a doctor of naturopathic medicine, clinical nutritionist, and author with a passion to help people get well using food as medicine. He recently authored “Eat Dirt” and “ Gut Repair Cookbook.” He also operates one of the world’s largest natural health websites at DrAxe.com.