

Executive Summary

For more than 50 years the American Heart Association (AHA) has issued and updated science-based dietary recommendations about controlling risk factors for cardiovascular diseases. Dietary fats, particularly saturated fat, are an area of keen interest among consumers, health professionals, and the media. This white paper highlights the evolution of the association's dietary fat recommendations. As a topic of much discussion and often controversy, it's important for health professionals to understand the AHA's recommendations and to be able to communicate them to patients/clients.

Many who question recommendations to reduce dietary saturated fats rely on studies that the AHA and other organizations believe have methodological limitations and are therefore less reliable for drawing conclusions and making public health recommendations. This white paper discusses the strengths and limitations of the types of studies that examine the relationships between dietary intake, disease risk factors, and health outcomes. Many of the claims that question recommendations to reduce dietary saturated fats rely on analyses that have not taken the replacement nutrient into consideration, but the replacement nutrient can have a profound effect on the outcomes measured. On balance, replacement of dietary saturated fat with polyunsaturated fat has been shown to have a beneficial effect on coronary heart disease risk and LDL cholesterol concentrations. Replacement of dietary saturated fat with carbohydrate has been shown to have lesser effect.

The fields of nutrition science and research methodology that evaluate the impact of diet on health have made significant advances since the 1960s, providing the opportunity to continuously update dietary recommendations to reflect the latest evidence available. Over the past 50 years, dietary fat recommendations have shifted from total fat to type of fat, and from nutrient-based to food-based with the addition of environmental and policy recommendations to support healthy lifestyles. The recommendation to reduce dietary saturated fats from current intake levels has been consistent over time, among not only AHA's recommendations but in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans as well.

Contrary to what has been reported in the media and likely perceived by many health care professionals and consumers, the AHA does not advise a low-fat diet for optimal heart health. In fact, the term "low-fat" in reference to total recommended dietary fat intake does not appear in the association's 2006 recommendations or 2013 guidelines.

The AHA's most recent comprehensive dietary guidance was issued in November 2013 and recognizes that the overall dietary pattern is more important than individual foods. The recommended dietary pattern emphasizes fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, while including low-fat dairy products, poultry, fish, legumes, non-tropical vegetable oils and nuts, and limiting red meat, sweets, sodium, and sugar-sweetened beverages. It is low in saturated and *trans* fats, with an emphasis on incorporating unsaturated fats.