

Audio available at <http://kidshealth.org/kid/stay_healthy/food/fat.html> (6.2)

Fat is a component in food. Some foods, including most fruits and vegetables, have almost no fat. Other foods have plenty of fat. They include nuts, oils, butter, and meats like beef.

The name — fat — may make it sound like something you shouldn't eat. But fat is an important part of a healthy diet. And little kids, especially, need a certain amount of fat in their diets so the [brain](http://kidshealth.org/kid/body/brain_noSW.html) and [nervous system](http://kidshealth.org/kid/word/n/word_nervous_system.html) develop correctly. That's why toddlers need to drink whole milk, which has more fat, and older kids can drink low-fat or skim milk.

**Doing the Math**

How much fat should you eat? Experts say kids older than 2 should get about 30% of their daily calories from fat. Here's how that works. Every day, you eat a certain amount of calories. For instance, some kids will eat 2,000 calories in a day. If 30% of 2,000 calories comes from fat, that means that 600 calories will come from fat. You can look at a food label to learn how many grams of fat are in a serving of a food. Labels also list the total calories from fat.

One way to reach this goal is to eat foods that are about 30% fat. But few foods contain exactly 30% fat. Instead, you can eat a mix of foods — some with higher percentages of fat and some with lower percentages — so that you still meet that goal of 30% of calories from fat.

Here's a sample menu to help you reach that goal. It includes a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, milk, and an apple. The peanut butter is high in fat, but it's a nutritious food and the overall total from the whole meal is about 30% from fat.

* Two slices of bread = 13% fat (30 of 230 calories from fat)
* Two tablespoons of peanut butter = 75% fat (140 of 190 calories from fat)
* One tablespoon of jelly = 0% fat (0 of 50 calories from fat)
* One cup of 1% milk = 18 % (20 of 110 calories from fat)
* Apple = 0% (0 of 80 calories from fat)

Total = 29% fat (190 of 660 calories from fat)

But you don't have to carry a calculator with you all time. With help from parents and other adults, you can learn to eat in this balanced way without stressing over each gram of fat.

### Types of Fat

You might see ads for foods that say they're "low-fat" or "fat-free." Lower-fat [diets](http://kidshealth.org/kid/stay_healthy/food/diet.html) have been recommended for health and to help people lose weight. But nutrition experts are finding that fats are more complicated and that some kinds of fat are actually good for your health. As a bonus, fat in food helps people feel satisfied, so they don't eat as much.

But that doesn't mean a high-fat diet will be good for you. And some fats are better than others. Here are the three major types:

**Unsaturated fats:** These are found in plant foods and fish. These may be good for heart health when they're used in place of saturated and trans fats. Unsaturated fats are found in salmon, avocados, olives, and walnuts, and vegetable oils like soybean, corn, canola, and olive oil.

**Saturated fats:** These fats are found in meat and other animal products, such as butter, cheese, and all milk except skim. Saturated fats are also in palm and coconut oils, which are often used in commercial baked goods (the kind you buy at the store). Eating too much saturated fat can raise blood cholesterol levels and increase the risk of [heart disease](http://kidshealth.org/kid/grownup/conditions/heart_disease.html).

**Trans fats:** These fats are found in stick margarine. Trans fats are also found in certain foods that you buy at the store or in a restaurant, such as snack foods, baked goods, and fried foods. When you see "hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated" oils on an ingredient list, the food contains trans fats. Trans fats are also listed on the food label. Like saturated fats, trans fats can raise cholesterol and increase the risk of heart disease.

### Why Do We Need Fat?

Dietary fat helps a kid's body grow and develop like it should. Fats fuel the body and help absorb some vitamins. They also are the building blocks of hormones and they insulate nervous system tissue in the body.

So fat is not the enemy, but you'll want to choose the right amount — and the right kind — of fat. If you're getting most of your fat from lean meats, fish, and heart-healthy oils, you've already made fat your friend!

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