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## Dietary Recommendations for Children --A Recipe for Future Heart Disease?

There are many recommendations about the amounts of fat and the different types of fatty acids we should put into our diets. Who needs which fat(s) and how much? Are men different from women in their requirements? Are children different from adults in their requirements? What about the tolerances for fat as opposed to the absolute requirements for fat? What about the requirements for different fatty acids or different fatty acid categories? How much fat do children need for growth and development? How much of each of the different fatty acid classes do children need?

### US Dietary Guidelines

Through the USDA food pyramid and official dietary guidelines, the US government promotes a diet containing no more than 30 percent of calories as fat, with no more than 10 percent of calories as saturated fat. In a diet of 2400 calories, that translates into about 5 tablespoons total fat from all sources—including the fat in meat, eggs, butter, cheese, cooking fats and oils, baked goods and salad dressings—with about 5 teaspoons of saturated fat. As butter, coconut oil and the fat on meat contain well over half of their calories as saturated fat, this means that these healthy foods must be severely restricted if one wants to adhere to the dietary guidelines.

Government agencies developed these guidelines and promoted them as a way to prevent heart disease in adults. Many scientists have shown that the theory that restricting fats can prevent heart disease is completely faulty. In any event, the guidelines were originally formulated as guidelines for adults at risk for heart disease.

Since the early 1990s, the US Dietary Guidelines have promoted a lower fat intake for children as well as for adults, as a way of protecting them from heart disease

later in life. The USDA has even gone so far as to proudly acclaim that they have successfully developed lower fat meals for school lunches. The American Pediatrics Association now recommends that children age 2 or older be given reduced fat milk. How wise is this approach to feeding children?

## Growth

Pediatric clinicians noted a number of years ago that children who were put onto lowfat and low-cholesterol diets failed to grow properly. It seems that during the critical growing years, children need levels of fat substantially in excess of the levels recommended in the US dietary guidelines. After all, mother's milk contains 55 percent of calories as fat, much of it saturated fat. Children need high levels of fat throughout the period of growth and development. Milk and animal fats give energy and also help children build muscle and bone. In addition, the animal fats provide vitamins A and D necessary for protein and mineral assimilation.

## Protection Against Infection

Children have been shown to be more susceptible to infectious diseases than most adults. In the past, the mortality in children was higher than it is now. That was because we did not have the antibiotic treatments that we now have. But infants who were fed human milk did not usually succumb to the viral illnesses that they were exposed to because their mothers were providing them with disease-fighting components in their milk. Some of these disease-fighting components in the mother's milk were special fatty acids that the mammary gland made. These fatty acids are called lauric acid and caproic acid. These disease-fighting fatty acids can be part of older children's diets if they consume foods that contain coconut or coconut oil, palm kernel oil, or, to a lesser extent, good quality cream and high fat milk. Unfortunately, when parents adhere to the dietary guidelines, these components will be absent in their children's diets.

## Heart Disease

There are two types of cholesterol. The High Density Lipid (HDL) is said to be good, while the Low Density Lipid (LDL) cholesterol is said to be bad. Actually the LDL cholesterol plays many important roles and it is not bad—nor are high levels of LDL a marker for proneness to heart disease. Normally our genes produce a form of LDL that is described as "fluffy and light." When the LDL produced is "small and dense," this is a cause for concern because this form of LDL cholesterol is not normal, and is associated with increased proneness to heart disease.

What happens when children are put on lower fat diets? When researchers prominently associated with the American Heart Association fed children lower fat diets and measured some of the markers they consider important predictors of heart

disease, they learned that these lower fat diets were causing the very problems they wanted to prevent. The children whose genes would normally have been producing the desirable light and fluffy form of LDL started to make the dangerous small and dense form of LDL (Dreon, MD et al, American Journal of Clinical Nutrition 2000 71:1611-1616). Thus the US dietary recommendations are likely to be causing heart disease, not preventing it.

## Which Are Good Fats and Oils for Children?

Good fats and oils can be an inherent part of the food children eat such as the fat in meat and fish and fat in the vegetables, nuts, and grains; or they can be added to foods through cooking and as dressings and sauces. A spoonful of a particular fat or oil can be easily added to soups, stews, mixed dishes or hot cereals.

Good fats are quality dairy fats from grass-fed cows, such as butter, cream and whole milk. Good fats are natural fats from properly fed animals, poultry, and fish. These animal fats supply true vitamin A, vitamin D and the proper cholesterol needed for brain and vision development. The animal fats also supply other fat soluble nutrients that support the immune system such as glycosphingolipids. Fish oils such as cod liver oil also supply important elongated omega-3 fatty acids as well as vitamins A and D.

Good oils are those readily extracted from fruits such as olive oil, palm oil, coconut oil, and they are traditionally unrefined. Good oils are also those that are unrefined and extracted from many nuts and seeds. Some of these oils are called omega-3 oils, some are called omega-6 oils, and some are called omega-9 oils. Oils with plenty of omega-3 include flaxseed oil and perilla oil; those with moderate amounts of omega-3 fatty acids include unrefined canola, soybean, and walnut oils. However, for various reasons, most canola and soybean oil should be avoided. Many oils such as unrefined corn oil, safflower oil, and sunflower oil do not have omega-3 but are typically high in omega-6 fatty acids and they should be used only in very small amounts.

Foods should be chosen so that they supply a mixture of these different fats and oils. No one fat or oil can properly suit all purposes, although many of the good quality animal fats come close. Children need enough of the stable saturated fats, they need enough of the monounsaturated fats or oils, and they need an adequate amount and a proper balance of the essential fatty acids, which come primarily from the omega-3 and omega-6 oils.

## Other Dangers

One of the chief dangers of the US Dietary Guidelines is that they encourage parents to use substitutes for natural saturated fats, such as margarine and shortening. These manufactured fats are composed of partially hydrogenated vegetable oils,

high in trans fatty acids. These are particularly dangerous for growing children as they can interfere with growth and the development of the nervous system, and affect sexual maturation and fertility. They can also cause cancer and heart disease.

## JUST SAY NO!

When it comes to feeding their children, parents should "just say no!" to the government's dietary guidelines. Children need a diet rich in traditional fats in order to achieve optimum growth and development, as well as protection from heart disease later in life.

### About the Author

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