

The Facts on Fat: The Importance of Saturated Fat Limits in the Dietary Guidelines

Background

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) are one of the most influential levers to shift food procurement and diets in the US due to their impact on all federal nutrition programs.ⁱ They are currently being updated to be released by the end of 2025, and Secretary Kennedy has stated the new DGA will “stress the need to eat saturated fats, dairy,” and “good meat,”ⁱⁱ breaking with decades of nutrition guidance. The recommendation to limit saturated fat is one of the most long-standing recommendations in the DGA,ⁱⁱⁱ consistent with high-quality evidence and guidance from major public health organizations in the US and internationally.^{iv} This fact sheet summarizes that evidence and explains why the final DGA should follow the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee’s (DGAC) advice to “maintain current limits on added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium.”^v

The World’s Nutrition Experts Agree on Guidance to Limit Saturated Fat

Based on reviews of all relevant, high-quality studies, the 2020-2025 DGA^{vi} (released during the first Trump administration) and the 2025 DGAC report^{vii} recommend:

- **Limiting saturated fat to less than 10 percent of calories per day** starting at age 2,
- Following a healthy dietary pattern that is “higher in vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, whole grains, fish/seafood, and vegetable oils higher in unsaturated fat and **lower in red and processed meats, sugar-sweetened foods and beverages, refined grains, and saturated fat**”
- Meeting food group needs with **nutrient-dense foods** that provide vitamins and minerals but little (or no) added sugars, sodium, or saturated fat

The Science is Clear: Saturated Fat Increases Cardiovascular Disease Risk

Decades^{viii} of evidence have supported the link between saturated fat and cardiovascular disease (CVD), including updated reviews of the highest-quality evidence from randomized controlled trials (RCTs):

- A 2017 Presidential Advisory from the American Heart Association examined four high-quality RCTs and concluded that “**lowering intake of saturated fat** and replacing it with unsaturated fats, especially polyunsaturated fats, **will lower the incidence of CVD.**”^{ix} *[emphasis added]*
- A 2020 systematic review of 12 RCTs found that reducing saturated fat for at least 2 years can reduce cardiovascular events by 17 percent.^x

In addition to the evidence from clinical trials, studies that ask people what they eat and then follow them for decades have reached similar conclusions. For example, a study that tracked roughly 107,000 adults for up to 30 years found that replacing 5 percent of calories from saturated fats with equivalent calories from unsaturated fats was linked to a **15 percent lower risk of heart disease** in men and a **25 percent lower risk** in women.^{xi} There are studies with conflicting results, but these are often poorly designed (and industry-funded). You can read more about the details in the Saturated Fat FAQ on CSPI’s website.

The 2025 DGAC report reaffirmed the connection between saturated fat and CVD in its review and further found that:

- Most Americans **overconsume saturated fat**—more than 80 percent^{xii} of the US population exceeds the recommended 10 percent limit for saturated fat intake, and saturated fat has been named as a “**nutrient of public health concern**” due to widespread overconsumption.^{xiii}
- **Replacing saturated fats** (like those in full-fat dairy and red meat) with **unsaturated fats** (found in foods like nuts, seeds, and vegetable oils) **reduces cardiovascular disease risk**.

The 2020-2025 DGA and 2025 DGAC recommendations are consistent with guidance from other leading public health bodies:

- The **American Heart Association** recommends a dietary pattern with less than 6% of total calories from saturated fat.^{xiv}
- The **World Health Organization** says intake of saturated fats should be less than 10% of total energy intake.^{xv}

Saturated Fat from Dairy and Red Meat Increases the Risk of Heart Disease

While dairy and meat can provide important nutrients, **the 2025 DGAC and 2020-2025 DGA both recommend choosing low-fat or fat-free dairy and lean meats** to help Americans meet nutrition needs without increasing saturated fat intake.

- There are high amounts of saturated fat in high-fat meat, full-fat dairy products like whole milk, ice cream, and butter, coconut oil, and palm oil.^{xvi}
- Recent high-quality trials show **that higher intake of saturated fat from dairy increases LDL, or “bad” cholesterol**, a risk factor for heart disease.^{xvii}
- **Whole milk isn’t worth the risk:** Whole milk, low-fat, and skim milk have the same amount of protein and equivalent amounts of essential nutrients like calcium and Vitamin D, but whole milk has **five times the saturated fat content** compared to low-fat milk. That’s why school meal nutrition standards don’t (and shouldn’t) allow whole milk.

Support Science-based Dietary Guidelines to Save American Lives

- Heart disease is the **number one cause of death** in the US: one person dies every **34 seconds** from CVD.^{xviii} Saturated fat can raise your cholesterol, putting you at higher risk of heart disease.
- Health care services, medicine, and lost productivity due to cardiovascular disease cost **\$417.9 billion** from 2020-2021; this number has been estimated to **triple to \$1.8 trillion** by 2050.^{xix}

Congress and the administration should support a science-based DGA. With chronic disease and nutrition misinformation on the rise, Americans need clarity about how to lead healthier lives. The 2025 DGAC recommendations are based on clear and consistent scientific evidence: replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats lowers the risk of cardiovascular disease. **Limits on saturated fat should be maintained in the 2025-2030 DGA.**

For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

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