

## Yoga is good for your heart! by Gill Smith

Research has suggested that having a regular yoga practice may help protect against heart disease. Researchers in the Netherlands collated 37 studies involving nearly 2,768 people and found that yoga was independently linked to a lowering of heart risk factors such as high blood pressure and cholesterol.

Coronary heart disease is Britain's biggest killer, with more than 80,000 lives lost a year to heart attacks and other cardiac problems. Smoking, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, being overweight and not exercising are some of the main risk factors.

Yoga is often not strenuous enough to count towards the 'moderate intensity' physical activity that we are recommended to do each week, but experts say it may still be beneficial.

The study carried out in the Netherlands, lead by Prof Myriam Hunink from Erasmus University Medical Center in Rotterdam, set out to investigate what effect yoga might have on heart health. It showed to be better for our heart than no exercise and comparable to other aerobic exercise. Compared with no exercise, yoga had significant benefits, linked to a lower risk of obesity, high blood pressure and raised cholesterol. Compared with other types of exercise, such as brisk walking or jogging, yoga was no better or worse based on the same measures of heart risk.

Prof Hunink said: "These results indicate that yoga is potentially very useful and in my view worth pursuing as a risk improvement practice."

Experts suggest the beneficial results may be due to the calming effect yoga has. Other studies have shown stress to be a predictor for heart disease and high blood pressure. Maureen Talbot, senior cardiac nurse at the British Heart Foundation, said: "The benefits could be due to working the muscles and breathing, which can bring more oxygen into the body, leading to lower blood pressure."

The study also showed that yoga helped with weight loss, made it easier to give up smoking and in some cases worked better than prescription blood pressure and cholesterol medication.

These results are particularly encouraging for those who feel unable to do more strenuous forms of exercise. As teachers and students we know how great yoga is for our physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing, but it is great when more and more research helps support this knowledge.

### Refs:

BBC, *Yoga may guard against heart disease, study suggests*, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2014.  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-30475999>

Daily Mail, *Yoga is as healthy for your heart as cycling: Studies find it helps weight loss and cuts blood pressure*, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2014.

Daily Telegraph, *Yoga just as good as aerobics for cutting heart disease risk*, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2014.

## **CONFUSED ABOUT FATS?** Barbara Tomkinson

In the dim and distant past of my childhood I remember eating butter, full-fat cream and unhomogenized full-fat milk without a care in the world. Then in the sixties, that all began to change to save us from heart attacks and strokes and a real fear of saturated fat began to take root. Margarine took the place of butter, semi-skimmed and skimmed milk, cottage cheese and reduced fat this that and the other. And yet, here we are 50 years on with the incidence of heart attack and stroke still rising. Obesity is also on the rise – so – it would seem that demonising saturated fat has not done the trick after all. Man has consumed saturated fat since the day dot – it is a natural food – how can it be wrong to eat it?

The British Medical Journal makes the following comments in an article written in 2013:

*‘ ... The mantra that saturated fat must be removed to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease has dominated dietary advice and guidelines for almost four decades....  
...Yet scientific evidence shows that this advice has, paradoxically, increased our cardiovascular risks. .... ‘*

And a study by the University of Cambridge in March 2014 showed that:

*‘... current evidence does not support guidelines which restrict the consumption of saturated fats in order to prevent heart disease. The researchers also found insufficient support for guidelines which advocate the high consumption of polyunsaturated fats (such as omega 3 and omega 6) to reduce the risk of coronary disease.’*

The status about which fats are good for us and which are bad can still be somewhat confusing. The subject is huge and there is now a wealth of information available on the internet but having read through some of it and listened to experts in the field, the following seems to be pretty clear.

Studies into the causes of cardiovascular disease began a number of years ago in the early 50's which claimed that saturated fat was the culprit. This has since been largely disproven (and indeed was possibly never proven – even deemed an unethical study by some medics) and the following facts have emerged:

- Saturated fat does not cause heart disease and is safe to eat in sensible amounts, (approximately one third of total fat intake, i.e. 10%, ‘total fat intake’ = 30% of total calorie intake)

- Monounsaturated fat (oleic acid and includes omega 9) is safe to eat
- Polyunsaturated fats (omega 3, alpha-Linolenic acid and 6, Linoleic acid) are healthy to eat in sensible amounts
- Synthetic trans fats are to be avoided at all costs

**Saturated fat:** is solid at room temperature and found in fatty meats, butter, lard, cream, palm oil, coconuts and full-fat products such as dark chocolate. It is a naturally occurring fat that has been consumed by humans for thousands of years. Eaten in sensible quantities, the body can process this quite happily. It is a vital component in the make-up of healthy cell walls. Some of the best sources of this type of fat come from the foods produced from **grass-fed** animals, (as opposed to grain fed).

**Monounsaturated fats:** include omega 9 fatty acids which the body can produce itself from unsaturated fats and are liquid at room temperature. This type of fat can be found in different types of fish, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, butter, eggs and Cheshire cheese and in oils such as olive oil, avocado oil and cod liver oil. Cooking can destroy components of this fat so it is best not heated but used in, for example, salad dressings.

**Polyunsaturated fats:** are liquid at room temperature and are a little more tricky. They include omega 3 and 6, essential fatty acids which the body cannot produce itself. It is important to obtain these from food sources and particularly important to have unprocessed omega 6.

**Omega 3** is an anti-inflammatory and there are three types of this fatty acid: '[ALA](#) (found in plant oils), [EPA](#), and [DHA](#) (both commonly found in marine oils)' - Wikipedia. Such foods as cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, spinach, walnuts, flax seeds, oily fish and other sea food contain omega 3. Also meat, eggs and dairy food obtained from animals whose diets have been rich in omega 3, i.e. animals out at pasture, eating grass.

The anti-inflammatory qualities of omega 3 are thought to play an important role in brain health, a healthy heart and possibly helping to prevent diseases such as arthritis, diabetes and Alzheimer's, among many others.

The table below '*summarizes some of these basic relationships between omega-3s and diet types*' and is from an informative website: <http://www.whfoods.com>

<b>Diet Type</b>	<b>ALA Food Sources</b>	<b>EPA and DHA Food Sources</b>
Vegan	many plants	sea plants; possibly land plant foods when fermented with the help of certain fungi
Generally vegetarian but	many plants	most fish; sea plants; possibly land plant

<i>including fish</i>	<i>and most fish</i>	<i>foods when fermented with the help of certain fungi</i>
<i>Generally vegetarian but including eggs, cheese, milk and yogurt (without fish, sea plants, or meat)</i>	<i>many plants; eggs, cheese, milk, and yogurt</i>	<i>eggs, cheese, milk, and yogurt, especially when obtained from grass-fed animals but in varying amounts depending on additional factors; possibly land plant foods when fermented with the help of certain fungi</i>
<i>Plant-eating and meat-eating (but without fish or sea plants)</i>	<i>many plants; many meats</i>	<i>many meats, especially when obtained from grass-fed animals, but in varying amounts, depending on additional factors; possibly land plant foods when fermented with the help of certain fungi</i>

**Omega 6** is pro-inflammatory in nature which is also a vital function for the body to remain healthy. However, in the west we have available to us processed vegetable oils which are not a good source of omega 6. This was created by the food industry requiring foods to have a longer shelf life but in-so-doing, sacrificed its ability to absorb oxygen (so it does not go off). This process of heating the oil creates trans fats, (see below), which are best avoided. We need to ensure that we consume unprocessed omega 6.

Omega 6 can be found in many foods such as free range poultry, grass fed beef, nuts, whole grain breads, flax oil, pumpkin seeds and evening primrose oil.

**It is important to avoid processed vegetable oils.** Stick to oils that are obtained by mechanical extraction, such as extra virgin olive oil and palm oil (from a sustainable source) and avocado oil.

There is also a good deal of information about the ratio of omega 3 to 6 that should be consumed and there are differing opinions as to what is correct but generally speaking a ratio of 2:1 has been found to be favourable. As already discussed, others seem to think it is more important to ensure that we consume unprocessed omega 6 and don't think that the proportion is that important. The danger regarding omega 6 is that it is found in many convenience foods in its processed form, making it possible to consume more of this type of oil (in its processed form), than is good for us.

**Synthetic Trans Fats** are created by:

*"... hydrogenation - an industrial process in which oil is heated to a high temperature (typically 260-270°C) under pressure and in the presence of a metal catalyst such as nickel, Rayner's nickel (a nickel / aluminium alloy) platinum, palladium or cobalt, then hydrogen is introduced. The catalyst is*

*normally present in the form of a fine powder and one health concern is that a small quantity of it must remain in the oil. The hydrogen is absorbed into the fat molecules, changing its molecular structure and its chemical composition as it converts the unsaturated oil to a more saturated form.”*  
<http://www.tfx.org.uk>

(Visit this website for an interesting ‘history’ of the creation of trans fats. See also Wikipedia ‘Transfat’).

The consumption of trans fats are thought to be linked to many chronic diseases and some wonder if they may be partly the cause of the apparent upsurge in chronic diseases and allergies. Some countries have banned the use of trans fats in commercial products and the situation is improving in the UK, with some producers having volunteered to remove trans fats from their products but they are not banned. However, to be on the safe side, it is probably best to home cook where possible using known whole foods and avoid convenience foods altogether.

Whilst some supermarkets have ceased to use trans fats **in their own products**, (although they may sell products made by other producers who still use trans fats and do we really trust them anyway?), restaurants and fast food outlets are not obliged to refrain from using trans fats.

(See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/features/dying-for-a-burger-why-are-trans-fats-still-legal-in-the-uk-2351306.html>)

**Naturally occurring trans fats** found in some foods do not pose any danger as they are in small quantities and are different in make up to synthetic trans fats.

Professor Jeremy Pearson, Associated Medical Director at the British Heart Foundation (which helped fund the study at Cambridge University) said, *“This analysis of existing data suggests there isn’t enough evidence to say that a diet rich in polyunsaturated fats but low in saturated fats reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease. But large scale clinical studies are needed as these researchers recommend, before making a conclusive judgement.”*

*“ .... the best way to stay heart healthy is to stop smoking, stay active and ensure our whole diet is healthy – and this means considering not only fats in our diet but also the intake of salt, sugar and fruit and vegetables.”*

This article is not about whether or not to eat meat or be a vegetarian/vegan but simply to help us choose the best combination of fats to remain healthy. I hope it has helped a little. I have kept it short as the science behind all this is complex. Several websites have been cited for your perusal but there are many more: [www.tfx.org.uk](http://www.tfx.org.uk) [www.authoritynutrition.com](http://www.authoritynutrition.com)

<http://www.theresilienceprogramme.com/physical-wellbeing/problem-trans-fats>