

## WHICH IS KILLING YOU FAT OR SUGAR ?

Most of you will have seen articles in the press on fat versus sugar, and before those of you with a negative disposition say "why bother, it will all change next week?" I say RUBBISH. We have been singing from the same hymn sheet about saturated fat for more than 40 years, and only now are things changing. Furthermore the changes are being brought about by good scientific research, and if you reject that then the next time you have an operation tell the anaesthetist to put away all the gadgetry and drip some chloroform onto a pad. Hope you do not feel too much of the pain.

The fact is that scientists have re-evaluated more than 70 well-conducted studies going back many years and they found no difference in the risk of heart disease between those who ate saturated fat and those who confined themselves (as far as possible) to unsaturated fat. So the saturated fat and heart disease risk is being shown the door. However this applies to total saturated fat intake but there are different types and it seems likely that whereas some saturated fats are bad for us, others are good, and the balance is neutral.

What about long chain omega 3 fatty acids, do they protect the heart ? The answer is similar to above, there are different types, some of which protect and some of which do not. However, the good news is that the long-standing belief that including oily fish in the diet is good for us still holds good, because the long chain omega 3s in oily fish are of the protective type, but the protection is very weak so these are not miracle foods. HOWEVER, taking supplements of omega 3 (as in capsules) offers no protection against anything. The only protection comes from those occurring naturally in the diet, and even then not all and not much.

So on balance it is unlikely that your fat consumption is going to kill you, as long as you apply common sense and remember that fat contains twice the calories weight for weight as carbohydrates or protein, and, assuming you try to control your weight, fats cannot be eaten with gay abandon, but we can certainly have a much more relaxed approach to dietary fat.

One type of fat which has not been given the all clear is trans fat. This does not occur in nature but is manufactured and is known to be harmful in several ways. Most western countries are trying to set much lower safety limits and some are trying to ban them altogether. They are used for deep fat frying, particularly in fast food chains, but I believe McDonalds have stopped using them so hopefully others will follow suit. Trans fats are also used to make some cakes pastries and biscuits, so check the labels or better, don't eat them at all.

So, dietary fat has been found innocent of almost all of the charges, but with sugar it is a very different story. I shall first of all explain a few dietary terms. Carbohydrates are the principle source of readily available energy and they are an essential part of our diet. However, there are different types. Complex carbohydrates consist of many units, they are absorbed and digested slowly and cause only small fluctuations in blood sugar and insulin. Simple carbohydrates consist of few units, they are absorbed and digested very quickly and cause large fluctuations in blood sugar and insulin, which is harmful. Table sugar, the granulated stuff you buy in bags in the supermarket (hopefully not too often) consists of only 2 units, glucose and fructose. Fructose is particularly bad for us because we can

utilise it for energy in only small quantities and the surplus is turned into abdominal fat. Some syrups, widely added to food by manufacturers, such as high fructose corn syrup may contain more than 90% fructose, most of which will end up as abdominal fat. Added sugar is 11 times more potent in causing weight gain and diabetes than are general calories.

Why is this coming to light now? Because adding sugar to processed foods started about 40 years ago when the move towards lower fat foods was starting and has been gathering momentum ever since. The manufacturers knew that reduced fat food was often less tasty but adding sugar made them much more popular and protected sales. Overall, calorie consumption in Britain has been falling for 30 years according to DEFRA (Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) but our sugar consumption has continued to rise, and along with it, obesity. In Britain on average we each consume more than 1kg sugar, 238 teaspoons, each week but most of it you never see. Obesity is associated with increased risk for diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

So now you know, fat is not killing us but sugar is and it is difficult to avoid. The best you can do is to carefully read food labels but they often contain little of the information you want. Also eat less prepared foods and concentrate on fresh ingredients which you cook yourself.

Finally do not get too hung up on all this. One of the great pleasures in life is sharing food with friends and family, and if you feel like a sticky pudding eat and enjoy, but not too often. Sugar is very addictive. Seriously, it may be one of the greatest addictions in the modern world. Remember exercise is one of the major ingredients for health BUT in relation to diet it is the sugar not the fat which kills, and I cannot assure you that exercise overrides this.

Have fun in the kitchen

Dr. Geoff