

Low-Fat Diets and Heart Health: What's Really True?

On February 8, 2006, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published the results of a \$415 million, eight-year study on the presumed health benefits of a low-fat diet. Researchers were surprised to discover that low-fat dieting seemed to have little or no effect on the incidence of heart disease, stroke, and breast cancer. Their findings made headline news across the country. “Low-Fat Diet Does Not Cut Health Risks, Study Finds” proclaimed the front page of the *New York Times*. “Study Finds No Major Benefits of Low-Fat Diet” declared the *Boston Globe*. And our own *San Francisco Chronicle* put it like this: “Okay, So Don’t Hold the Fries.”

Not holding the fries, however, is not a particularly heart-healthy choice, even taking into account the recently published study results. Readers who went on to read the fine print of the newspaper articles about the study learned quickly that unchecked consumption of trans fats, hydrogenated oils, and saturated fats (which are found in nearly all fast foods) is still recognized as a major contributing factor in coronary artery disease and stroke.

The highly publicized study closely monitored the progress of 49,000 post-menopausal women, ages 50 to 79, over the course of an eight-year period. Half of the women were assigned a low-fat diet while the other half maintained their normal eating habits. The women in the first group were supposed to try and consume only 20% of their calories as fat, but even with extensive coaching by nutritionists, this proved far too difficult, and by the end of the study, the women in the first group were consuming an average of 29% of their calories as fat. By contrast, the women in the control group consumed an average of 37% of their calories as fat.

However, the women in both groups consumed approximately the same number of *calories*. Therefore, there were no significant weight gain differences between the two groups, and nutrition experts were quick to point out that the study does *not* show there are no benefits to a balanced diet (with plenty of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables) that keeps weight in check. Obesity remains a major risk factor for heart disease and diabetes.

Furthermore, the women who went on the low-fat diet reduced their intake of *all* fats, including polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats (such as those found in healthy foods, like olive oil and fresh nuts), which have now been long regarded as benign and even beneficial. Strong clinical evidence indicates that a “Mediterranean diet”—one high in “good fats” such as olive oil and avocados but low in “bad fats” such as butter and fried foods—*can* significantly reduce the risk of heart disease and strokes. The eight-year “low-fat” study, though the largest of its kind to date, was designed in the late 1980s, before researchers understood as much as they do today about the differences between harmful fats and healthy fats.

Many people may have seen the headlines in February and thought, “Great! Now I can eat all the fattening foods I want.” But this is dead wrong. The lesson here is that newspapers like to trumpet big stories, and so sometimes headlines may be misleading.

Especially when it comes to your health, be sure you get the whole report. *Do* hold the fries, keep exercising, eat a balanced diet, and limit your intake of non-nutritious fatty foods!