



## Red meat and fat

In the UK, the consumption of total fat has fallen considerably over the last 30 years, and on average we meet the Department of Health dietary recommendation (no more than 35% of our total energy intake from food). However, the average intake of saturated fat for both men and women (12.7% of total energy intake from food) is still higher than recommended (no more than 11% of total energy intake from food).

The main sources of saturated fatty acids in the UK diet are fat spreads, fat used in pastry and baked goods, fatty meat and meat products, and full fat dairy products. To reduce intake of saturated fatty acids, select lean cuts of meat, reduced or low fat spreads and dairy products, and reduce intake of pastry and baked goods.

### The Fat Content of Red Meat

Contrary to popular belief, lean red meat does not contain high levels of fat or saturated fatty acids. The total fat content of red meat has been considerably reduced over the last few decades and the amount of fat in red meat is actually much lower than some people think.

The application of improved animal breeding and butchery techniques means that fully trimmed lean raw pork contains only about 4% fat, and fully trimmed raw beef only around 5% fat, and fully trimmed lean raw lamb only 8% fat. Despite common reference to animal fats as being 'saturated', red meat contains both saturated and unsaturated fatty acids. Indeed, lean beef and pork contain more unsaturated fatty acids than saturated fatty acids.

Red meat also contains small amounts of omega-3 fatty acids. Long-chain omega-3 fatty acids can contribute to maintaining the health of the heart. Although only a small amount of long-chain omega-3 fatty acids can be found in meat, there are very few rich sources apart from oily fish, which means meat can usefully contribute to intakes for those who don't consume oily fish..

### Saturated fatty acids

Originally, all saturated fatty acids were thought to be associated with increased blood cholesterol, but it has become apparent that individual saturated fatty acids differ in their effect. One of the main saturated fatty acids present in red meat is called stearic acid and

there is evidence that this fatty acid does not have a significant effect on cholesterol levels in the blood<sup>12</sup>.

For labelling purposes, a food is defined as 'high' in saturated fat if it contains 5 g (or more) saturated fat per 100 g. A food is defined as 'low' in saturated fat if it contains 1.5 g (or less) saturated fat per 100 g<sup>3</sup>. Most lean red meats are, therefore, not high in saturated fat and contain only moderate amounts (see table below).

#### **Saturated fat content, per 100 g, lean cooked red meat**

<b>Red meat cut</b>	<b>Saturated fat</b>
Lean beef rump steak, grilled	2.5 g
Lean beef topside	2.1 g
Lean stewing beef	2.3 g
Lean lamb loin chops, grilled	4.9 g
Lean leg of lamb, roasted	3.8 g
Lean stewing lamb	6.5 g
Lean diced cubed pork, casseroled	1.9 g
Lean pork loin chops, grilled	2.2 g
Lean pork leg, roasted	1.9 g

Source: McCance & Widdowson 2015

In addition, we can further reduce our intake of total fat and saturated fat from meat by choosing healthier preparation and cooking methods.

#### **Key Tips**

- Where possible, select lean red meat
- Trim off any excess fat before cooking
- Grill rather than fry
- Avoid adding extra fat and oil

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<sup>1</sup> Daley CA, Abbott A, et al. (2010 ). "A review of fatty acid profiles and antioxidant content in grass-fed and grain-fed beef." Nutrition Journal 9 (10).

<sup>2</sup> Mensink RP. Effects of saturated fatty acids on serum lipids and lipoproteins: a systematic review and regression analysis. World Health Organization, 2016

<sup>3</sup> [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood)

- Dry-fry mince and stewing meats and discard any melted fat
- Consider portion size: larger portion sizes will have a higher fat and saturated fat content.
- The addition of vegetables, pulses or fruit will help bulk up dishes and reduce the total fat and saturated fat content of a dish per 100 g.
- Check the labels on processed meat products and select those with a lower fat and saturated fat content.

### Nutrition Labelling

Much of the saturated fat we consume comes from processed food: for example, ready meals, pies, bacon, burgers and sausages. Some are composite foods containing other ingredients such as pastry that will add to the saturated fat content. When choosing processed meat products compare the nutrition labels of similar products and select the lower saturated fat option.

The Reference Intake (RI, sometimes featured on food labels) [for adults](#) for saturated fat is no more than 20 g /day<sup>4</sup>. Moderate portions of lean red meat provide relatively small amounts of saturated fat as a proportion of the RI. For example, a 100 g serving of lean roast beef topside would contribute 2.1 g of saturated fat or just over 10% of the RI.

### In Conclusion

Lean red meat is much lower in fat and saturated fat than some people think. Most lean red meats are not high in saturated fat and contain only moderate amounts. In addition, evidence suggests that stearic acid, one of the saturated fatty acids found in red meat, does not have a significant effect on blood cholesterol levels<sup>56</sup>.

Carefully checking the nutrition labels on meat products, choosing lean cuts of red meat, trimming off any visible fat and cooking in a healthier way will help to reduce the fat and saturated fat content further, ensuring that red and processed meats can be enjoyed as part of a healthy, balanced diet.

For more information please visit: [www.meatandhealth.com](http://www.meatandhealth.com)

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<sup>4</sup> [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/Eat-less-saturated-fat](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/Eat-less-saturated-fat)

<sup>5</sup> Daley CA, Abbott A, et al. (2010 ). "A review of fatty acid profiles and antioxidant content in grass-fed and grain-fed beef." *Nutrition Journal* 9 (10). Remove references not appropriate for consumers. MS 05/09/11

<sup>6</sup> Mensink RP. Effects of saturated fatty acids on serum lipids and lipoproteins: a systematic review and regression analysis. World Health Organization, 2016

