

American Heart Association doubles down on outmoded saturated fat recommendations



Are you suffering from health news whiplash? It seems lately that all the news has been about the how saturated fats have been exonerated—studies show that meat and high fat dairy contribute negligibly or not at all to the risk of heart disease.

In the face of all this new evidence, I've railed against the American Heart Association's obdurate refusal to acknowledge that they were wrong. They continue to maintain, on their website and through their public pronouncements, that consumers should curtail their consumption of saturated fats and substitute instead polyunsaturated oils—corn, soy, and safflower. ✖

A recent National Institutes of Health review shattered that premise: It showed that by swapping dietary saturated fats with vegetable oils, subjects indeed lowered their cholesterol. But that cholesterol reduction didn't translate into protection against atherosclerosis, heart attacks or death from all causes.

But last week, to my astonishment, the American Heart Association reiterated its position: Its "Presidential Advisory on Dietary Fats and Cardiovascular Disease" states "Lower intake of saturated fat and coupled with higher intake of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fat is associated with lower rates of cardiovascular disease and of other major causes of death and all-cause mortality." The magnitude of this protective effect is estimated to be a whopping 30%, comparable to the use of statin drugs [irony intended!].

This is reminiscent of the way a religious orthodoxy, whose authority might be threatened with facts that undermine its cherished dogma, would fight back with renewed vigor: Science declares, "The earth is round." Counter this heresy by delivering a pronouncement that, indeed, the earth is flat. Order it proclaimed from every pulpit.

Sorry to break this to you, folks, but in science, as in religion and in politics, there are factions ideologically committed to a point of view, who marshal facts to buttress their deep-seated ideological pre-conceptions.

Gary Taubes, a previous guest on Intelligent Medicine and author of *The Case Against Sugar*, encapsulates this beautifully in a recent critique of the AHA guidelines. Quoting the 17th Century philosopher-scientist Francis Bacon: "The human understanding, once it has adopted opinions, either because they were already accepted and believed, or because it likes them, draws everything else to support and agree with them."

Taubes makes the case that the AHA committee members cherry-picked data to include

only those studies supportive of their pre-arranged conclusion that saturated fats are the culprits in heart disease. He calls this “Bing Crosby epidemiology”—i.e. “accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative”—after one of the beloved crooner’s signature songs.

“Whether consciously or unconsciously, they assume that what they think is true surely is, and then they methodically eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive until they can make the case that they are surely, clearly and unequivocally right. And they might be, just as a lawyer arguing a case to a jury might always be right, but you can never know it from the lawyer’s argument alone. You have to hear the counter as well and then maybe you can decide.”

Perhaps the most compelling rationale against the incorporation of vegetable oils in a “heart-healthy” diet is that they’re unnatural. For millennia, humans have evolved to prize saturated fat as a hedge against starvation. Neanderthals collected and stored mammoth fat during harsh Ice Age winters; Native Americans rendered bison fat; Inuit Eskimoes consumed blubber; Southerners valued pork lard, and Eastern European Jews coveted “schmaltz” from chicken fat. That the biological order of things should be so thoroughly reversed with the advent of mechanized processing of polyunsaturated vegetable oil is deeply counter-intuitive.

With the exception of olive oil and coconut oil, the use of major cooking oils like soybean, canola, sunflower, safflower, peanut and cottonseed is a modern phenomenon. Cottonseed oil was first introduced as a shortening by Procter and Gamble in 1911. Its production relies on industrialized mechanical or solvent extraction—wholly artificial processes.

The essential fatty acid composition of vegetable oils—exclusively Omega 6—tilts the balance away from beneficial Omega 3s. Studies reveal that high Omega 6:3 ratios are predictive of heart risk. Polyunsaturated oils are chemically unstable, vulnerable to heat damage and oxidation, and hence contribute to the body burden of free radicals. They are profoundly pro-inflammatory.

The predominance of Omega 6 oils in the Western diet has been linked to inflammatory disorders, autoimmunity, allergy, neurological diseases and psychiatric conditions. Most studies show they are bad for the heart, but the AHA reviewers deemed these studies unfit for inclusion in their analysis.

An unintended consequence of the AHA’s and the government’s anti-fat exhortations over the last decades has been a dramatic uptick in U.S. carbohydrate consumption. The satiety that untrimmed meat and full-fat dairy provide has given way to compensatory starch and sugar intake, with a disastrous impact on the incidence of metabolic syndrome/insulin resistance—more contributory to heart disease and stroke than high cholesterol.

It’s difficult for establishment lipid researchers to shed the deeply-flawed research model of Nikolaj Anitschkow, an early 20th Century Russian physiologist who demonstrated that you could induce atherosclerotic lesions in the aortas of rabbits who were fed copious amounts of lard. It may seem obvious, but rabbits are not carnivores, although that didn’t stop Anitschkow’s research from launching the Cholesterol Hypothesis which has held reign in academia for decades.

An unfortunate corollary to the AHA anti-saturated fat stance has been the demonization of coconut oil. After years of being told extra-virgin coconut oil is a miracle food, consumers were regaled with headlines like this from *USA Today*: “Coconut oil isn’t healthy. It’s never been healthy.”

I'll save my fact-finding article on coconut oil for a future newsletter, but suffice it to say that it's simplistic to indict coconut oil merely because it's a saturated fat; numerous studies suggest it has beneficial properties.

