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Changing views about saturated fat and cardiovascular disease

A group of the world’s leading scientists debated the long-held beliefs about the impact of saturated fat on cardiovascular disease (CVD) at a landmark international symposium, held at the University of Copenhagen in May, 2010.


For the past three decades, saturated fat has been considered a major culprit of CVD and as a result dietary advice persists in recommending a reduced intake of saturated fat, regardless of its source.

Consequently, recent dietary trends have focused on ‘what not to eat’ instead of emphasising ‘what to eat,’ resulting in the vilification of foods such as dairy which contains naturally occurring fats, while overlooking its many essential nutrients and valuable contribution to a healthy diet.

The experts concluded that the effect of diet on a single marker of cardiovascular health, such as cholesterol, is insufficient evidence to assess CVD risk. The effect of a specific food on the risk of CVD cannot be determined on the basis of its saturated fat content alone.

Dairy Australia dietitian Glenys Zucco says, “There are many different types of saturated fats – which all have varying effects on the body.”

“Saturated fats can no longer be considered a single group in terms of structure and function,” she adds.

When it comes to determining the relationship between CVD and food, the entire nutrient composition of a food may be more important than concentrating solely on the type of fat it contains.

As an example, the paper points out that the protein, calcium and other nutrients within cheese, including certain fatty acids, may offset the effects of its saturated fat content on cholesterol and overall CVD risk.

This view was supported by a new Danish study which suggested calcium in dairy foods could counteract the effect dairy fat has in raising total and LDL cholesterol levels.

The researchers fed subjects a range of diets with varying levels of calcium (mainly from dairy foods) and dairy fat, measuring their blood cholesterol levels at the end of each diet period.

Dairy calcium was found to have a beneficial effect on cholesterol, partly counteracting the negative effects of dairy fat on ‘bad’ cholesterol without impacting levels of ‘good’ cholesterol. This explains why it can be misleading to categorise complex foods such as dairy foods as healthy or less healthy based solely on their saturated fat content.

“These results are consistent with observational studies which show intake of high calcium dairy products is associated with a lower risk of CVD,” Ms Zucco says.

Foods such as full-fat dairy foods naturally contain saturated fats, however they are also rich in essential minerals such as calcium, potassium and magnesium which may have beneficial effects not only on bone health but also cardiovascular health.”

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References:


Declaration:
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