

Evidence does not support saturated fats being harmful for cardiovascular health

I am a GP with a longstanding interest and postgraduate training in nutrition. Over the past 12 months I have also consulted for a company which imports and distributes coconut oil. As part of this work, I have researched in great detail saturated fat and human health. As a result of this research, I am convinced of the significant health benefits of a balanced diet, which includes saturated fat. In your recent *Back to Back* article regarding saturated fat and cardiovascular disease,¹ I believe that Prof. Skeaff employed some questionable tactics to support his argument that saturated fats are harmful for cardiovascular health.

Firstly, Prof. Skeaff attempts to link saturated fat (SFA) directly with cardiovascular disease. As anyone with an understanding of research will tell you, just because replacing saturated fat with polyunsaturated fat (PUFA) may reduce heart disease, it doesn't confirm a direct causal link between saturated fat and cardiovascular disease.

The recently published Cochrane report on dietary fat and cardiovascular disease² makes it blatantly clear that saturated fat is not causally linked to cardiovascular disease, or any other disease for that matter. In fact, the Cochrane report states there is no significant effect of any dietary fat intervention, compared to usual or control diet, on cardiovascular mortality.

Another misleading point is that while a small positive cardiovascular effect has been found by replacing saturated fat with unsaturated fat, this has only been found in men!³ Are we not concerned about women's health also?

The emphasis on cardiovascular disease by epidemiologists and research scientists can cloud the bigger picture required to practise clinical medicine. Similarly, scientific research on individual macromolecules does not equate to clinical advice on foods. The effect of particular foods on cardiovascular disease cannot be predicted solely by their content of total SFA⁴⁻⁷ This is because saturated fats are a diverse group of fats with variable cardiovascular effects. Additionally, major SFA

food sources contain other constituents that appear to influence cardiovascular disease risk. The advice of Prof. Skeaff to use margarine instead of butter is a good example of science confusing food constituents for isolated chemicals, and confusing humans for test tubes. Even using basic biochemical principles, does it not seem counterintuitive that we could synthesise foods that are healthier than naturally occurring foods humans have been eating for thousands of years?

In 2012 the evidence is certainly mounting that the real demons for cardiovascular health are trans fats and refined carbohydrates.²⁻⁴ Surely it is time we leave naturally occurring saturated fat in foods to do the essential structural and biochemical actions we have evolved to depend upon, and concentrate on reducing the consumption of highly refined and processed foods.

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References

1. Skeaff M, Jackson R. Saturated fat has been unfairly demonised—the 'no' case. *J Prim Health Care*. 2011;3(4):320–1.
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