

# The low-fat trap

» Fat fads | By Lynda Wharton

Is the low-fat food fad all it's cracked up to be? Do reduced-fat foods help us lose weight? They could actually be contributing to the rise in obesity, says Lynda Wharton

{ We are a nation of wobbling, ever-expanding waistlines. Nearly 900,000 of us are overweight, with a further 500,000 classified as clinically obese. This means that around one and a half million New Zealanders are intermittently locked in a losing struggle with their bathroom scales.

For many, waging the 'battle of the bulge' leads to obsessive label-reading in the supermarket. The words 'fat reduced' or 'low fat' become their holy grail. They are a reassuring, optimistic promise of a svelte and glorious body, hovering just around the corner. So, with supermarket trolleys groaning under an avalanche of such foods, why are so many New Zealanders still struggling with their weight?

The thing is, a processed food may well be low in fat, but that does not necessarily mean that it is low in calories. In fact, many low-fat foods have just as many calories as their full-fat counterparts. This is because, with the fat taken out, what is left is often unappetising and unappealing. To solve this problem and keep the consumer

coming back for more, low-fat processed foods are often adulterated with additional carbohydrates. And they're not just any carbs, but the high glycemic index ones that mess with our blood sugar regulation. Especially popular and troublesome for weight watchers is the controversial sweetener, high-fructose corn syrup.

Further, the misconception that low fat equals low calorie often leads to over-consumption. This is prompted by the mistaken belief that, because you have done the right thing in choosing the low-fat option, you can eat more of it without suffering any weight-gain consequences.

Fat-reduced processed foods also lead

dieters. So, combine a processed, fat-reduced food with the high glycemic carbohydrate that has most probably been added, and you have a perfect recipe for unrelenting hunger. It's hardly the best recipe for effective weight-loss!

Dietary fats are essential to our health. They help us to absorb the fat-soluble vitamins A, E and K; they serve as a reserve for energy storage; and they are needed for the healthy functioning of our brain, nervous, immune and hormonal systems. They are even essential for helping to maintain a normal metabolism, which controls how quickly our body burns energy.

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to increased consumption of another type. Fat is a vital part of our appetite regulation. Foods containing fats are digested more slowly than low-fat or high-carbohydrate meals, leading to a greater sense of satisfaction and fullness for a longer period of time. The truth is that dietary fats are the most effective way of appeasing the constant, gnawing hunger that is the nemesis of many overweight

Severely limiting dietary fats actually serves to slow down our metabolic rate, meaning that we need fewer calories to stay alive, but also meaning that we gain weight on progressively fewer calories too. For maximum health, we need to choose from the healthy omega-3 and omega-9 fats, found in fish, nuts and seeds, avocados, and olive, rice bran and flax oils. At the same time, we should limit

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saturated fats and trans fatty acids.

Then, we need to add the hormone insulin into the equation, which has everything to do with fat storage and weight-gain. This is the hormone responsible for regulating our blood sugar levels by moving sugar out of the bloodstream and into our cells. The body first converts this sugar into glycogen, which is stored in the liver and muscles. When they are full, the remaining glucose is stored as body fat.

However, it is vitally important for all dieters to understand that insulin – and subsequent fat storage – behaves differently, depending on the types of food eaten. Carbohydrates, especially high-GI carbs such as the sweeteners added to many low-fat foods, stimulate the greatest insulin response. Fats, on the other hand, do not raise insulin or blood glucose levels.

When insulin is circulating in the bloodstream, even at quite low levels, fatty acid synthesis is activated, and the burning of stored fat is greatly inhibited. Insulin prevents your body from making the hormone-sensitive fat-burning enzyme, lipase. Essentially, this means that your fat-reduced processed foods, with added carbohydrates, force your body into making fats, not burning them!

When you eat a low-fat, high-carb food, your blood glucose level will be back down to normal after about 90 minutes, but your insulin levels will still be high, working to stack glucose away in your fat cells. This often leads to a blood sugar slump, which comes

with an overwhelming desire to reach for the next carbohydrate fix... often in the shape of a chocolate biscuit or a slice of cake. And so the whole cycle begins again. Hunger is ever-present, and along with it comes gradual weight gain.

Repeated for long enough, this cycle of insulin elevation can lead to insulin resistance, whereby ever higher levels of insulin are needed to move blood sugar across the cell membranes. More insulin means more fat deposition, and this is a precursor to the development of Type II diabetes.

Ironically, the most comfortable and effective way to lower insulin levels, and encourage the body to burn stored fat instead of blood glucose, is to limit carbohydrates, while making sure that you are taking in adequate levels of healthy dietary fats. This forces the body to burn fat for fuel, without any of the feelings of starvation inherent in low-fat, low-calorie dieting.

So, how do you regulate insulin levels and encourage your body to burn fat? Not by becoming a low-fat junkie! Exercise regularly, using a combination of aerobic activity and resistance training to build lean muscle, in order to increase your resting metabolic rate. Eat five or six mini-meals a day, made up of low-glycemic index carbohydrates (vegetables or fruit); healthy fats and proteins. And avoid the high-glycemic index carbohydrates frequently found in processed foods as a result of added sweeteners such as high fructose corn syrup. ◀