

Insight 5

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Is Total Fat Consumption Really Decreasing?

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Introduction

The linkage between poor diet and various diseases has been well documented. A major contributor to many diet-related diseases is the overconsumption of fat. In particular, the type and quantity of dietary fat are risk factors for the development of coronary heart disease and some types of cancer. It is estimated that diet-related diseases cost society over \$250 billion annually in medical expenses and lost productivity (1).

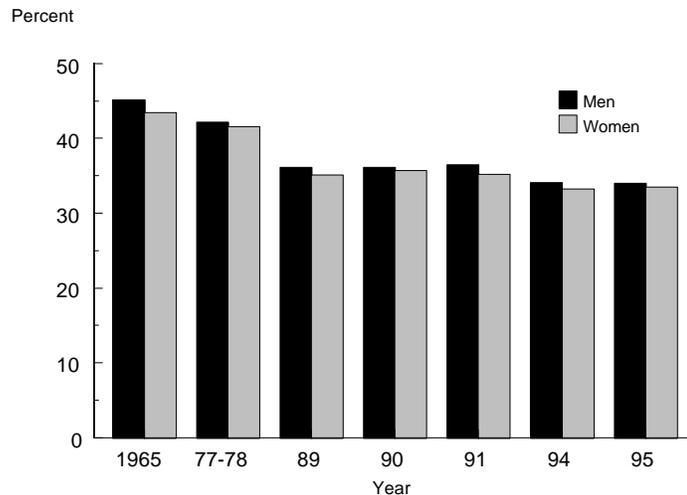
Recognizing the importance of a healthful diet, the U.S. Government formulates dietary guidance and maintains a nutrition monitoring system to assess healthfulness of the diet of Americans. For over a century, USDA has provided

dietary guidance to the public. Since 1980, the Government has produced dietary recommendations called *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* issued jointly by the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services.

Government Recommends Limit on Fat Intake

Since their inception, the *Dietary Guidelines* have recommended that Americans 2 years and over choose a diet moderate in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol. The 1990 *Dietary Guidelines* were the first to set numerical goals: total fat consumption should be limited to 30 percent or less of total caloric intake, and saturated fat intake should be limited to less than 10 percent of total caloric intake.

Figure 1. Percent of calories from total fat, individuals 19 to 50 years of age



In addition to reducing the risk for chronic diseases, a diet low in total fat makes it easier to consume the variety of foods, such as fruits and vegetables, needed to provide essential nutrients without exceeding caloric needs. The 1995 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, a group composed of independent experts in the fields of nutrition, dietetics, and health, retained the numeric goals for fat set in 1990.

Relative Fat Consumption Continues to Decline; Total Fat Consumption Does Not

Figure 1 shows that adult Americans have dramatically lowered the percent of caloric intake from total fat over the last three decades. The reduction is from about 45 percent of calories from fat in 1965 to about 34 percent in 1995.

The table shows that daily fat consumption, measured in grams, by men 19 to 50 years of age also declined from 139 gm/day in 1965 to 89 gm/day in 1990. However, it increased to 101 gm/day in 1995. The largest increase (not shown), 33 percent, was seen in 31- to 40-year-old men who consumed a daily average of 109 gm of fat in 1995, compared with 82 gm in 1990. Women 19 to 50 years old decreased their fat intake from 83 gm/day in 1965 to 62 gm/day in 1989 and maintained their fat consumption almost at the same level thereafter.

Summarizing, fat consumption in both men and women decreased between 1965 and 1990. The percent of calories from fat continued to decrease between 1990 and 1995 even as the daily grams of fat intake remained steady or increased.

Average total fat consumption, individuals 19 to 50 years of age

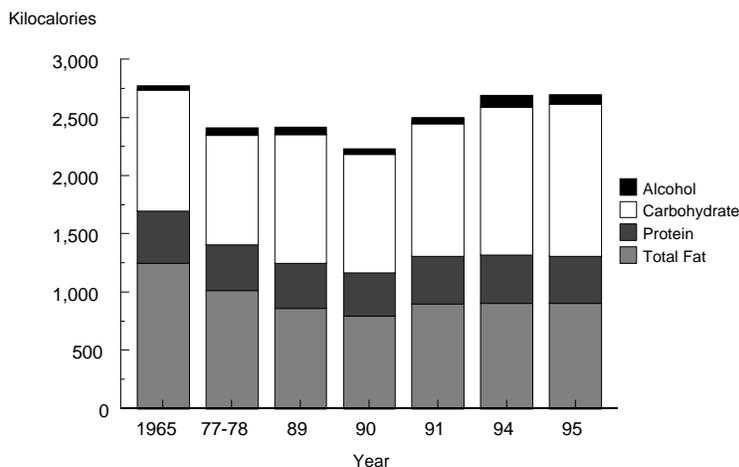
Years	Men	Women
--- Grams per day---		
1965	139	83
1977-78	113	73
1989	96	62
1990	89	64
1991	100	62
1994	101	62
1995	101	65

The explanation for this apparent paradox is that although daily fat consumption was increasing or remaining unchanged, the total caloric intake was increasing at a relatively faster pace (figs. 2 and 3). For example, there was a 13-percent increase in fat consumption among men 19 to 50 years old between 1990 and 1995, but a 21-percent increase in total caloric intake over the same period. A higher number of calories consumed will reduce the calculated percentage of calories from fat even when there is no decrease in total fat consumption.

The recent increase in caloric intake comes largely from increased carbohydrate consumption, and to a lesser extent, increased alcohol consumption. Analysis of food consumption data by the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion reveals that increased consumption of grain products, certain soft drinks, and alcoholic beverages has contributed to the overall reported increase in caloric intake (2).

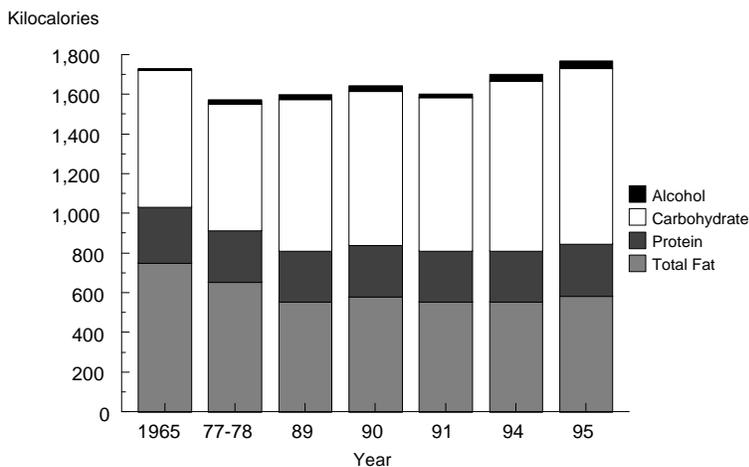
The percent of calories from fat continued to decrease between 1990 and 1995 even as the daily grams of fat intake remained steady or increased.

Figure 2. Contribution to total caloric intake: Men 19 to 50 years of age



Total caloric intake, as well as calories from fat, decreased between 1965 and 1990. Total caloric intake began to increase relatively more than the increase in calories from fat between 1991 and 1995.

Figure 3. Contribution to total caloric intake: Women 19 to 50 years of age



Total caloric intake, as well as calories from fat, decreased between 1965 and 1989. Total caloric intake increased between 1990 and 1995, whereas calories for fat consumption remained at a steady level.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1965 and 1977-78 Nationwide Food Consumption Surveys, and 1989-91 and 1994-95 Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals.

Conclusion

Total fat consumption expressed as a percent of caloric intake has steadily decreased since 1965. However, in the past 5 years, the decrease in percent of calories from fat is a result of increased total caloric intake and not necessarily due to decreased fat consumption. The daily fat intake in grams has, in fact, increased in many cases, reversing the trend of Americans consuming less fat in their diet as was reported earlier (3).

References

1. Frazao, E. 1996. The American diet: A costly health problem. *FoodReview* 19(1):1-6.
2. Chanmugam, P., Morton, J., and Guthrie, J. 1998. Reported changes in energy and fat intakes in adults and their food group sources. *The FASEB Journal* 12(4):(Abstract #4887).
3. Anand, R.S., Basiotis, P., and Kennedy, E. 1997. Rise in amount of total fat and number of calories consumed by Americans. *The FASEB Journal* 11(3):A183. (Abstract #1064).

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