The Skinny on Fat

So now that we’ve talked about what a macro actually is and I’ve given you the scoop on protein, it’s time to talk about dietary fat, another third of the equation when it comes to dietary calories and nutrients. Fat has been an easy scapegoat for the obesity epidemic and an easy target for food manufacturers looking to lower calories in foods.

So, uh, what is fat?

Chemically, fats are molecules made from carbon and hydrogen joined together in an organic compound called hydrocarbons. Just like protein can be broken into smaller pieces called amino acids, fat can be broken down in its simplest form into fatty acids. The way these hydrocarbons join together and hook up with other chemical groups determines whether they are formed into saturated fatty acids or unsaturated fatty acids. Both are vital to cellular function.

Dietary fat is an energy source. It aids in the balance of various hormones, helps form our cell walls, aids in the formation of your brain and nervous system, and helps transport fat soluble vitamins throughout your body.

Your body can produce most of the fatty acids used for these various functions, but you must consume Omega 3 and Omega 6 in order to function optimally. These unsaturated fats help balance cholesterol levels and prevent disease so it is important you are consuming both each day, although the modern diet is often way out of balance when it comes to Omega 6 (found in corn oil, safflower oil, margarine, and corn fed meat), versus Omega 3s, unsaturated fats found in plant based products. One thing for certain is that your body needs one or two sources of plant based, unsaturated fat every day. An easy way to do this is to add a serving or two of avocado, olives, or oil made from them to a salad or while cooking.

What does ideal fat intake look like?

As with most things when it comes to the moving target of fitness nutrition, the answer is it that really depends on your goals and your body. Fat is the most calorie-dense of the macronutrients; one gram of fat is equal to 9 calories, more than double the calories for one gram of carbohydrate or protein (both of which are 4 calories).