



Fed up with trying diets that never work? It's time to question everything you ever heard about fatty foods being bad for your waistline, says Beth Cooper

In my mid-20s, I went on a fat-free eating plan to lose excess weight picked up during a working holiday abroad.

The diet involved cutting all forms of fat – everything from meat and milk to olives and nuts. Within a year, I had dropped three dress sizes and looked fabulous – but my success was short-lived.

Before the diet, I'd been plump but pretty healthy – glowing skin, sunny disposition and a body that worked. After the diet, my hair started falling out, pimples erupted, my moods swung between melancholic and murderous and I developed irritable bowel syndrome. Five years later, after suffering repeated stomach cramps and indigestion, my gall bladder was removed.

Knowledgeable nutritionists have told me that my ridiculous diet – invented, shockingly, by a medical doctor – was probably the primary cause of health problems I've had since then. Ironically, I've since piled on the weight again.

In our diet-obsessed culture, an army of important nutrients have been tossed out along with fried chips, mayonnaise and creamy salad dressings. In a desperate bid to curb weight gain, we've made fat the number one enemy and succumbed to a wildly profitable diet industry which tells us that all fats are bad.

Big fat lies

"After decades of anti-fat propaganda where we've been brainwashed to believe that all fats are harmful, much of humanity today is sicker – and fatter – than ever before," says Bruce Cohen, health researcher, journalist and CEO of organic products website Absolute Organix.

"Heart disease, obesity, diabetes, ADD and depression – these health scourges of the modern era

have been rising steadily. While it's obvious that every illness is not necessarily associated with a fat-free diet, the fact is that these illnesses have increased as the consumption of 'good fats' – those rich in omega 3 and 6 essential fatty acids – has been declining."

Cohen says the distinction between good fats – those essential for health and vitality – and bad fats, which clog up the arteries and impair our immune systems – has been blurred in the "over-hyped" promotion of fat-free, low-fat and reduced-fat diets.

Nutritionist and author Anne Louise Gittleman explains that there are two types of fats – those that heal and those that harm.

"Unfortunately, doctors, dietitians and others who should know better seem to have forgotten that fat happens to be an essential nutrient necessary for the health and well-being of our bodies and our brains," she explains. "Many of us are starved of certain kinds of (good) fats. This deficiency may be contributing to the rise in breast cancer, attention deficit disorder (hyperactivity), depression, diabetes, arthritis, immune system dysfunction, PMS and menopausal problems, not to mention nail, hair and skin problems such as eczema and psoriasis."

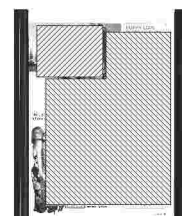
Gittleman says the majority of her clients suffer from a condition known as "fear of fats". They have been 'programmed' to believe that fat is bad and must be eliminated from all foods.

The good guys

Essential fatty acids (EFAs) are the 'good fats' that cannot be produced by the body and must therefore be supplied via food or supplements. EFAs are necessary for many bodily processes and support our nervous, immune, reproductive and cardiovascular systems.

In addition, these fats also have another important function – they actually help to burn body fat and therefore assist with weight loss.

There are two families of EFAs – omega 3 (alpha-linolenic acid, or LNA) and omega 6 (alpha-linoleic acid or LA). A third, omega 9, is not considered 'essential', since the body can manufacture it, provided there are enough



deposits of omega 3 and 6 in the body.

Our modern diets are typically very deficient in EFAs, particularly omega 3. Nutritional expert and author Patrick Holford explains that our bodies and brains depend on omega 3 and 6; excluding water, one third of the brain is made up of omega 3. "Almost nothing works well without them. Your brain can't function, leading to lower IQ, poor memory... your hormones go up the creek, your skin shrivels and your heart and arteries suffer."

In November 1997, Boston researchers published the results of their extensive Nurses' Health Study in the New England Journal of Medicine. The study of 80,000 nurses showed that it was not the amount of fat eaten, but the kind of fat, that determined health. Decreasing saturated fats – such as fatty meat and processed cheeses – and avoiding trans-fats such as margarine, while increasing good fats from natural, unrefined vegetable oils, was the answer to vitality and well-being.

Cohen says that consumers are becoming more aware of the importance of good fats, thanks to so much clinical research about the link between EFA deficiency and a wide range of illnesses. The internet is also a useful source of information, with sections of the public becoming far more health-savvy as a result of independent research. This has led to a boom in EFA supplements, available from health shops, pharmacies and websites.

But, he says, the fat-free hoax remains a big factor holding back widespread consumer adoption of good fats – and as a result, weight-conscious women in particular are playing with fire.

The war on weight

Getting your head around the fact that more fat in your diet means less fat on your thighs isn't easy. For years, we've been conditioned to count calories and curb fat intake. The idea that generous dollops of olive oil or a bowl of Brazil nuts might be essential tools for weight-loss doesn't sit easily with rabbit food aficionados.

Dr Udo Erasmus, a world expert on oils in nutrition and author of groundbreaking book *Fats That Heal Fats That Kill* (Alive Books), says that increasing omega 3 in the diet is an excellent weight-loss aid. He cites the example of a Californian woman who lost more than 40kg of excess fat by adding three

tablespoons of fresh flax oil – rich in EFAs – to her dietary programme. She had previously battled to lose weight, despite following a healthy eating plan.

Omega 3-based fats aid weight loss in three ways. Firstly, they assist with ridding our kidneys of excess water held in body tissues. Overweight

Friendly fatty foods

The typical modern diet is worryingly deficient in omega 3. Some experts claim that up to 95 per cent of the American population needs much more of it than they're getting. To increase your omega 3 intake, include some of these foods in your diet:

- Flax seeds and flax seed oil (the best vegetarian source of omega 3)
- Walnuts and Brazil nuts
- Pumpkin, sesame and hemp seeds
- Avocados
- Dark green leafy vegetables (kale, spinach, mustard greens, collards)
- Oily fish – salmon, mackerel, sardines and anchovies
- Albacore tuna
- Oils – cold-pressed and unrefined wheat germ and hemp seed oil
- Eggs from hens fed a high omega 3 diet

Nutritional scientist Heidi du Preez warns that our diets are more abundant in omega 6 than omega 3, at a ratio of 1:20. Increasing omega 3 intake is therefore probably the most helpful thing you can do for your health – especially since it assists with slimming down too. Omega 6 is important and you do need to include it in your diet. Simply try to up your omega 3 intake to balance out the two EFAs – a ratio of 1:1 is recommended by du Preez. Remember that these EFAs work together – you can't utilise one without the other and an imbalance is just as disease-causing as a deficiency. Sources of omega 6 include:

- Flax seeds and flax seed oil
- Pumpkin and sunflower seeds (raw)
- Olives
- Pistachio and pine nuts
- Olive, sunflower, corn, safflower and cottonseed oils (always choose extra-virgin, cold-pressed oils)
- Chicken
- Sesame, walnut, grapeseed, pumpkin, evening primrose, borage, chestnut, wheatgerm, blackcurrant seed oils

people often carry excess fat as a result of edema (water retention) and omega 3 helps to 'dump' it. Secondly, increased metabolic and oxidation rates and energy production means fat and glucose are burned and less fat is deposited. This, explains Erasmus, is the

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opposite of calorie-restricted dieting or fasting, which decrease our metabolic rates and may cause us to pile on kilograms, even with only a small amount of food. Finally, omega 3 naturally increases energy levels, leading to a more active lifestyle. The result? More lean muscle tissue, better metabolic rate, improved health and the 're-setting' of our fat thermostat to a lower level – making weight loss permanent.

It's important to choose unprocessed and unrefined foods – heat and over-processing destroys EFAs, so you'd choose raw sunflower seeds and not roasted, salted ones, for example. Olive oil is popular for frying and the EFAs contained in it will not turn toxic, as levels in olive oil are very low. Still, any frying destroys other beneficial nutrients, so steaming is best. If you must fry, choose extra-virgin, cold-pressed olive oil, preferably stir-fry and use a bit of water as well, to turn down the heat and prevent destruction of nutrients.

Since many of us have difficulty incorporating more EFA-rich foods into our diets – some people detest nuts or oily fish – it might be useful to consider taking a supplement instead. Always use a good quality supplement oil or capsule – preferably one

containing a mix of omega 3 and 6, with the ratio skewed in favour of omega 3. Some supplements also contain omega 9.

There is no magic pill for weight loss. Exercise, eating whole, unprocessed foods, taking good supplements and getting plenty of sunshine are all foot soldiers in the fight against disease and ill-health. But in our evolution towards slimness, essential fatty acids could provide the missing link that transforms fat to fabulous – as nature intended.

Sources and recommended reading :

- [Fats That Heal, Fats That Kill](#), by Uffe Brabant, PhD (Alec Books, 2003)
- [Eat Fat, Lose Weight](#), by Anne Louise Gillman and Dr. Gary L. Smith (MIRA)
- [Dietary Fatigue for Nuts \[e-Book\]](#), by Patrick Holford PhD (Cellular Science) (Penguin Books Ltd, 2004)
- [Health Power: Nutritional Tips to Live Well](#) www.naturalnutrition.co.uk
- www.absoluteorganic.co.uk - good quality EFA supplements
- www.nhs.uk/nhs.uk - your nearest supplier of EFA

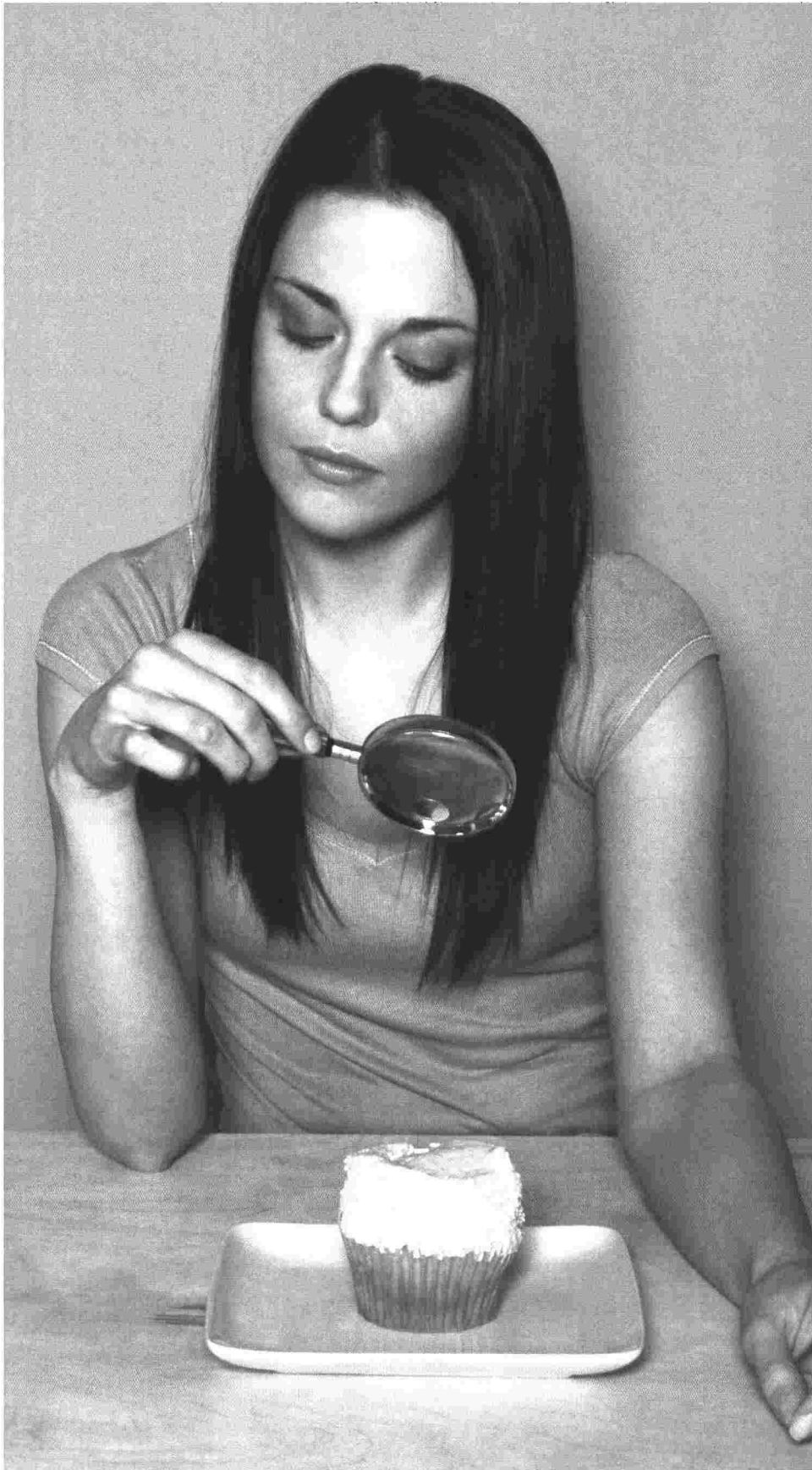
Brain food for your baby

Babies and children with a diet rich in omega 3 have a developmental edge and boosted intelligence, according to extensive research. While pregnant, your intake of omega 3 also

directly affects your baby. The growing foetus is so dependent on EFAs that it will actually source it from the mother's brain if there isn't a sufficient intake from her diet.

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