Fat Revisited

by James M. Haig, N.C.

It has been a banner summer for the alternative health movement, with major news items affirming many of the beliefs long held by more holistically minded practitioners and members of the public alike. Early in the summer, a report was released questioning the efficacy and validity of mammography (mammograms themselves elevate a woman's risk of breast cancer due to a combination of cumulative radiation exposure over a number of years and outright physical trauma to the breast tissue itself); the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) reversed its long-standing position against nutritional supplements, and now recommends them to all adult Americans; the dangers of synthetic hormones were dramatically exposed when the Women's Health Initiative trial was abruptly halted (see the accompanying article, *HRT: What's Next?*); *trans* fatty acids were finally "outed" as the true villains of the fat wars; and a lengthy, articulate article with the provocative title, What *if It's All Been a Big Fat Lie?,* appeared in the New York Times (Sunday July 7th), unleashing a national debate that made it all the way to the cover of Time Magazine.

The author of the New York Times article is Gary Taubes, a writer for the journal Science, arguably the most prestigious scientific journal in the U.S., for which he had written an earlier article called *The Soft Science of Dietary Fat* (March 30, 2001) that covered much of the same ground (for the full text of either piece, go to the reference section of your local library, or to www.atkinscenter.com). The main thrust of Taubes' article was that the low-fat gospel that has been preached by government agencies, mainstream medical and nutritional authorities, and the media for the last thirty years is based on shaky science and a faulty set of assumptions, and that, rather than curbing the nation's growing obesity problem, it has further exacerbated it. The less fat Americans eat, the fatter we get!

Taubes goes on to outline how dissenting voices to the new low-fat dogma — and there were many such voices, many of them coming from very well-respected mouths — were effectively quelled once the National Institutes of Health (NIH) signed off on it, an event that had more to do with political lobbying and financial interests than it did sound science. Taubes points out that the low-fat movement led to a substantial increase in the consumption of refined carbohydrates and sugar (especially in the ubiquitous form of high-fructose corn syrup), and that it is these, not natural fats, that are responsible for America's rapidly expanding waistlines, and the alarming increase of Type II diabetes. Along the way, Taubes points out that the supposed causal link between dietary fat consumption and cardiovascular disease has never been proven, despite several major studies and hundreds of millions of dollars spent trying to prove it; and he goes on to exonerate the work of Robert C. Atkins, M.D., the controversial New York City cardiologist who has almost single-handedly defied the low-fat paradigm, promoting through his best-selling books (such as *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution*) a diet based on the liberal use of fats and protein, despite almost universal vilification from his peers.

As might be expected, Taubes' article unleashed a firestorm of frantic denials, indignant rebuttals and furious back-pedaling from the apologists of the low-fat dogma. Perhaps the most thoughtful of these responses appeared in the Washington Post on August 27, 2002 (and available at www.washingtonpost.com), whose writer accused Taubes of somewhat arbitrarily selecting only the data that suited his argument, while discarding evidence that would weaken it.

Whatever the truth of these criticisms (and they were well documented), Taubes does make many excellent points in his article. Humans have been eating saturated fat for millennia, without suffering from the epidemic of cardiovascular disease and Type II diabetes that afflicts our modern society. Hard though it is to believe today, a heart attack was a medical rarity a mere 80 years ago, despite the fact that nineteenth century Americans (along with traditional cultures around the world) ate *more* saturated fat than we do today. In fact, Native Americans and other hunter-gatherer cultures, would deliberately select the fattiest parts of the animal (especially organ meats), regarding the leaner muscle meats as inferior.

Generally speaking, naturally occurring fats, including animal fats, are quite healthy. The true villains of the fat wars are processed fats. The very worst of these are the *trans* fatty acids that are found in all foods containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, such as fast foods, commercial pastries, cookies and crackers, margarine, and anything containing vegetable shortening. *Trans* fats are indeed associated with a substantially increased risk of heart disease, along with just about every other degenerative disease known to man. Following on their heels come man-made fats (such as *Olestra*), any fats or oils that have been overheated (and, therefore, damaged), and excess amounts of the omega-6 vegetable oils (corn, soy, safflower and sunflower), which upset the delicate balance with the all-important omega-3 oils.

From a Metabolic Typing perspective, there are indeed individuals (the Group I Metabolic Types) who do better on a relatively low-fat diet, though not exactly for the same reasons espoused by the low-fat diet gurus. Too much fat will tend to further slow down the already sluggish metabolism of the Slow Oxidizer, while further speeding up the already over-revved nervous system of the Sympathetic. Fats are not inherently bad even for these individuals; they simply should not be eaten in too great a quantity for them to achieve and maintain homeostasis.

By contrast, the Group II Metabolic Types thrive on a higher fat intake. For the Fast Oxidizer, fats help slow down the overly rapid rate at which they would otherwise tend to burn up carbohydrates; and for the Parasympathetic, they help to stimulate the under-expressed sympathetic branch of the nervous system. Thus we can see that the current debate over dietary fats underscores the main contention of Metabolic Typing, that there is no one diet that is right for everyone. We all need the same macronutrients (protein, fat and carbohydrates), but in varying amounts and forms to achieve and maintain optimal health.