



Ontario Home Economics Association

Ask a Professional Home Economist

For Immediate Release

Cooking Oils ~ Choose Wisely

by Ellie Topp, P.H.Ec.

We've come a long way since fat-free was considered the ultimate health benefit. Research has now shown that far from being harmful, fat in the form of unsaturated oils is essential for good health. The newly revised Canada's Food Guide recommends including 2 to 3 tablespoons (30 to 45 mL) of unsaturated fat a day in your diet. So the important message is to pay attention to the kind of fat you are eating, in addition to monitoring the total amount of fat that you consume.

What are the Good Fats?

Fatty acids, the building blocks which make up the fats and oils in our diets, are not created equal. Some are essential to health and must be obtained from food since our bodies cannot make them, while others are best kept to a minimum. What makes the choice confusing is that all of the fats and vegetable oils we eat are a mixture of fatty acids.

There are three groups of fatty acids: saturated, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated. It is the saturated fats that are considered "bad" fats ever since researchers began discovering strong links between their consumption and coronary heart disease. By contrast, unsaturated fats (both mono- and poly-) are very beneficial to heart health and also help to control blood glucose. Of the polyunsaturated fats, two are essential to obtain from food since our bodies cannot make them: alpha-linolenic acid (an omega-3 fat) and linoleic acid (an omega-6 fat).

All of the oils commonly found on our grocery shelves are a mixture of saturated and unsaturated fatty acids so there is no one oil that is ideal for all purposes. The choice of which oil is best depends on what you are looking for. When making a choice, keep three main factors in mind - flavour, use and health.

Flavour is mainly personal preference. Olive oil has a unique flavour and is often enjoyed in salad dressings or sautéed vegetables with a Mediterranean style. Extra virgin olive oil is the cold-pressed result of the first pressing of the olives. Products labelled simply 'pure olive oil' have been refined but their fatty acid profile is the same as extra virgin or virgin oils. Pure olive oil and other oils such as canola, safflower and sunflower have little taste and thus do not mask the flavours of other ingredients.

Use will help determine choice. For deep frying, the oil needs to have a high heat tolerance or smoke point. The smoke point is the temperature at which the oil begins to decompose. Peanut, canola, safflower, soybean, corn and sunflower oils all have relatively high smoke points. Olive oil, butter, and lard have a low heat tolerance and should not be used for deep frying. Oils with a neutral taste are recommended for baking. It is the saturated fats that give baked products their texture and keeping qualities. Thus butter, lard and hydrogenated shortening have traditionally been used to make the flakiest pie crusts and most tender shortbread.

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Health research has shown that unsaturated fatty acids are linked to a reduced risk of heart disease and stroke and also help to control blood glucose and blood insulin levels. Saturated fats, on the other hand, have been shown to have definite negative effects on health. A basic character of dietary fats is that those high in unsaturated fatty acids tend to be liquid at room temperature (think canola, corn and olive oil) while highly saturated fats are solid (think butter, margarine and coconut fat). Since all oils have a mixture of unsaturated and saturated fatty acids, health-wise the choice should be the one with the least saturated. Canola has only 7% saturated fat, the lowest of all familiar oils. Other oils such as safflower, sunflower, corn and soybean have higher amounts of saturated fat than does canola. Canola is also very high in monounsaturated fatty acids which several studies have shown to have significant benefits to health. Only olive oil has a higher percentage of these desirable fats. But olive oil has 15% saturated fat, over twice the amount found in canola oil.

Trans fats are formed when an oil is processed by adding hydrogen to the fatty acids in order to solidify the oil. Eating trans fat has been shown to increase the risk of coronary heart disease. All foods must now state the amount of trans fat on the nutrition label. Oils are free of trans fats; it is hydrogenated margarines and products made with these fats that are the major source of trans fats. Therefore, choose a margarine that is non-hydrogenated where the oil is made solid by the addition of a natural saturated fat such as palm oil, rather than by hydrogenation. Butter has good flavour and has only trace amounts of trans fat, but of course it is higher in saturated fat.

The Best Oil - Many cooking oils are currently available and information about them can be overwhelming. Overall canola oil with its neutral flavour and low saturated fat content is the most desirable choice for general use. It is normally one of the most economical, as well. For a salad dressing, many prefer olive oil for its unique flavour and healthy fat benefits.

FAVOURITE VINAIGRETTE

A traditional dressing to keep on hand in the refrigerator:

Whisk together 3/4 cup (175 mL) canola or olive oil, 1/4 cup (50 mL) red wine vinegar, 2 tbsp (25 mL) balsamic vinegar and 1 tbsp (15 mL) each: Dijon mustard and granulated sugar. Add salt and pepper to taste and a half minced clove garlic if desired. Makes 1-1/4 cups (300 mL)

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Ellie Topp is an Ottawa-based Professional Home Economist and certified culinary professional. She is co-author of several cookbooks including *The Complete Book of Year-Round Small Batch Preserving* and *Savoury Wisdom: Delicious Recipes for Two*.

The Ontario Home Economics Association, a self-regulated body of Professional Home Economists, promotes high professional standards among its members so that they may assist families and individuals to achieve and maintain a desirable quality of life.

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