

Veggie oil – from the frying pan into the fire?

With the flood of information about the healthful benefits of various vegetable oils on the market, it may be difficult for you to make an informed choice when standing in front of the supermarket shelf. Let's look at some of the factors that you should take into account when choosing a vegetable oil.

Does your body actually need fats or oils?

Yes, everyone needs some fat in their diet – but not a lot. It's an important source of energy, forms part of cell membranes, keeps your skin and hair healthy and is needed for the production of certain hormones. They help your body absorb fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E and K), protect your organs and keep your body warm. Your body definitely needs fats or oils – but not as much as most people eat.

Fats are energy dense (37 kJ in each gram of fat) – this is a lot compared to carbohydrates and proteins, which contain 17 kJ per gram. Although fats can be good for you, excessive fat intake can lead to weight gain, obesity and heart disease, so it is important to choose wisely and use it sparingly. The minimum amount of fats and oils you should eat is about 3 teaspoons per day.

Saturated and unsaturated content of fats or oils

Not only is it important to consider your total fat intake – you also need to take into account the type of fat in your diet. Vegetable oils generally contain a mixture of the various fatty acids (saturated, mono- and polyunsaturated fatty acids). These fats can have different effects on the cholesterol levels in your body. To reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease your fat intake should contain mostly healthy unsaturated fats. Replacing saturated fats and trans fats with mono- and polyunsaturated fats can lower total and LDL ('bad') cholesterol, so is beneficial when eaten in moderation.

Monounsaturated fats have a positive effect on LDL as well as HDL cholesterol levels and thus can help protect against Coronary Heart Disease. Oils rich in monounsaturated fats include olive, avocado, canola and peanut oils.

Polyunsaturated fats include omega-6 fats (abundant in our food supply) and omega-3 fats. Oils such as sunflower, corn, cottonseed, peanut and soybean oils are rich sources of omega-6 fatty acids. Omega-6 fats may lower LDL ('bad') cholesterol while omega-3 fats are particularly cardio-protective as they prevent blood clotting and help reduce triglyceride levels. As the typical South African eats far more omega-6 fats and not enough of the omega-3 type, try to include more omega-3 rich oils in your diet. Good plant sources of omega-3 fats are flaxseed or canola oils.

Try to keep **saturated and trans fat** intake as low as possible as they increase total and LDL cholesterol. Trans fats can also decrease HDL ('good') cholesterol levels in your blood.

These less desirable fats tend to be more solid at room temperature (like butter or some hard margarines), while mono- and polyunsaturated fats tend to be more liquid (like liquid vegetable oil). Some vegetable oils that are particularly rich in saturated fats are coconut and palm kernel oils, therefore should be avoided. These fats are commonly used in non-dairy creamers and milk powder blends, but may also be found in blended oils or shortenings used for prepared, processed or packaged foods.

Based on this information, the ideal cooking oil should contain higher amounts of mono- and polyunsaturated fats, with a minimal or no saturated fats and trans fats.

Smoking point of vegetable oils

When choosing oil for cooking, it is important to consider its smoking point, i.e. the temperature to which the oil can be heated before it smokes, becomes discoloured and undergoes degradation. Heating oil beyond this point will not only affect the flavour of the food but may result in the formation of trans fats and damaging free radicals – this does not usually happen with normal home cooking. It is more common in fast food outlets where deep frying is done at extremely high temperatures over extended periods of time and where oils are repeatedly re-used. It is sensible though, to avoid re-using cooking oils too often or eating foods cooked in oils that have been continually reheated.

The best oils for cooking and frying are those that have a high smoking point. Unrefined oils such as cold-pressed olive oil have relatively low smoking points so are not suitable for cooking at high temperatures. Oils with higher smoking points include: avocado, soybean, sunflower, peanut, grapeseed and canola. Bear in mind that deep frying foods is not recommended - it would be better to use healthier cooking methods (steaming, stir-frying using a little bit of oil, grilling, microwaving, baking, dry frying using a small amount of spray oil if necessary, pressure cooking or boiling).

Cost of various oils

Expensive oils may stretch your food budget somewhat. Have a look at these oils ranked from the cheapest to the most expensive, to help you choose a healthy oil without breaking your budget:

sunflower, canola, canolive, peanut, olive, sesame, walnut, macadamia, soybean, avocado, some brands of grapeseed.

Flavour

Try to keep your cooking interesting and fun by experimenting with different flavours. Decide on the dish you are preparing and match the oil accordingly, e.g. for Asian food try sesame or peanut oil and for Mediterranean cooking use olive oil. For general cooking or baking, it is probably best to use oil with very little flavour.

If in any doubt when you go shopping, try choosing a vegetable oil that bears the Heart Mark. Visit www.heartfoundation.co.za for the product list or contact the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222 for more information.

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