

The truth about 'healthy' oils

Read this before you hit the bottle

Until now, we've followed a simple rule about fats: saturated animal fats (like lard) are bad, and unsaturated ones (like vegetable oil) are good. But now a study has gone 360, claiming some 'healthy' oils – corn, sunflower and safflower – may actually *increase* heart disease. Confused? We asked Azmina Govindji, registered dietitian for the British Dietetic Association and expert for NHS Choices, to update our oil IQ.

OLIVE

What's good If there was an Oscar for oil, olive would clinch it – but dig up your chemistry knowledge to see why. It's high in monounsaturated fats, which have a chemical structure made up of one really strong double bond (hence the 'mono' bit). When you heat some oils, the chemical bonds break and the oil turns saturated (ie cholesterol raising). Not so with olive oil.

What's bad It's still fat, and counts towards your 70g fat RDA – so use it to replace other fats (not in addition to).

Use it For salads and shallow frying.

Watch out for... 'olive pomace' – cheaper oil made from the leftover residue from virgin olive oil.

SUNFLOWER

What's good It's very high in vitamin E – good for healthy cells and skin.

What's bad OK, back to chemistry. Unlike olive oil (high in monounsaturated fat), sunflower and corn oil is polyunsaturated. The word 'poly' means it has multiple double chemical bonds – which are much weaker than just having one. When this oil is heated repeatedly, the bonds break and actually turn the oil from unsaturated to saturated.

Use it For roasting and shallow frying.

Watch out for... re-using it. The more you do, like in those old chip pans, the more chemical bonds break and the unhealthier it becomes.

VEGETABLE

What's good Actually, a lot. Vegetable oil (usually made from rapeseed) has the lowest saturated fat content of any oil and ten times as much omega-3 as olive oil.

What's bad Don't be sucked in by speciality rapeseed oils that are pricey (and unnecessary).

Use it For high temperatures – it can be heated without the chemical structure breaking down. It's usually too bland for salads.

Watch out for... exactly what's in it. 100% rapeseed oil is good, as it's full of monounsaturated fat. Some vegetable oils are a mixture of different oils – check the label and watch out for polyunsaturated corn oil sneaking in.

COCONUT

What's good According to the hype, it can do everything from boosting immune function to preventing cancer.

What's bad The hype. The only thing that's actually been proven is that it may have a good impact on cholesterol levels – but scientists still aren't sure precisely why. Coconut oil actually contains about 90% saturated fat, but it's a specific plant-based saturated fat that seems to lower overall cholesterol levels. It's a fat that scientists are still trying to get their heads around.

Use it In cooking; it's semi-solid, so not great for salads.

Watch out for... going overboard. The current consensus is that it's better than butter, but not as good as other oils. A lot of its claims are based on anecdotal evidence, not science.

