

Cholesterol Management Health Center

Cholesterol and Cooking: Fats and Oils

For low-cholesterol cooking, use the right fats in the right amounts.

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WebMD Feature

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When you're cooking to lower cholesterol, you might think that fat is a four-letter word. But nutrition experts say that ridding your cooking of *all* fats and oils may actually work against efforts to lower your blood cholesterol levels. When it comes to fat, what counts are both quality and quantity.

Why You Need Fat

It would seem to make sense to drastically cut back on fat intake to lower your cholesterol. After all, dietary fat is connected to cholesterol concentrations in the blood, which are linked to your risk of heart disease and stroke. Yet, experts say, taking such a Spartan approach to eating will surely backfire.

"It's the worst thing you can do -- for your heart and overall health," says Janice Bissex, MS, RD, co-author of *The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers*. "Slashing fat is unhealthy, and it's unlikely that you'll stick with an eating plan that lacks the fat you require."

Bissex says fats and oils provide essential fatty acids for well-being, and some -- namely omega-3 fatty acids -- are actually good for your heart. Fat transports vitamins A, D, E, and K into and around the body, and it also provides calories -- 9 per gram.

In addition, fat adds to eating satisfaction because it's filling and tasty. The olive oil in Mediterranean fare, the butter in cookies, and the peanut oil that seasons stir-fried dishes helps make those foods worth eating.

Best Fats and Oils for Low-Cholesterol Cooking

To curb cholesterol levels, it's important to limit fat intake without going to extremes. It's also important to choose the right fats and oils for preparing meals and snacks.

The fat found in butter, margarine, soft spreads, and vegetable oils is considered either good (unsaturated) or bad (saturated and trans fat).

Unsaturated fats -- monounsaturated and polyunsaturated -- are deemed beneficial because they prevent clogged arteries that block the flow of blood to the heart and brain. Unsaturated fats should be the main types used in food preparation.

Monounsaturated fat is the primary type found in olive, canola, and sesame oils, as well as in avocados and avocado oil, and in nuts and their oils. Polyunsaturated fat is prevalent in corn, cottonseed, and safflower oils; sunflower seeds and sunflower oil; flaxseed and flaxseed oil; soybeans and soybean oil; tub margarine and soft spreads; and seafood.

Saturated fat increases the risk of blocked blood vessels. It's prevalent in fatty meats, and in full-fat dairy foods including butter, cheese, ice cream, and whole milk, all of which also contain significant dietary cholesterol. Coconut oil, palm, palm kernel oil, and cocoa butter supply large amounts of saturated fat, too, but are cholesterol-free.

Your body makes all the saturated fat and cholesterol it requires, so you don't need to eat any. You also don't need any trans fat, which, like saturated fat, increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. Trans fat is found in stick margarine, some tub margarine, and in shortening, as well as in some processed foods such as cookies, crackers, and pastry. Cooking oils do not contain trans fat.

Fats and Oils: Take the Good With the Bad

The fats used in cooking typically contain a mixture of "good" and "bad" fats. Fats and oils are deemed beneficial or not by how much saturated and unsaturated fat they supply. For example, olive oil is considered good, although it has some saturated fat, and butter is thought to be bad, even though it contains some unsaturated fat.

Just because a fat or oil is better for you doesn't mean you can eat as much as you want and still lower your cholesterol, however. Overdoing it on fats and oils rich in unsaturated fats, such as olive oil, contributes to your saturated fat intake, too. And, there are calories to consider.

"Oils have just as many calories as butter and stick margarine, so it is important to be mindful of how much you add in food preparation," says Sarah Krieger, MPH, RD, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. Unnecessary calories can make people overweight, another risk factor for heart disease.

Fats and Oils to Have on Hand

So what fats and oils should you buy for low-cholesterol cooking?

"Stock your cupboard with all-purpose oils rich in unsaturated fat that can stand high cooking temperatures, such as vegetable, safflower, and canola oils," says Jackie Newgent, RD, culinary nutritionist and the author of *Big Green Cookbook*.

Vegetable oils are the least expensive and the most versatile. For variety, Newgent recommends avocado, almond, and grapeseed oils.

And what about olive oil?

"You can cook with olive oil, but avoid exposing extra-virgin olive oil, sesame oil, and nut oils, such as walnut, to high heat, because they will burn," Krieger says. These oils are best suited to drizzling on cooked vegetables and salads."

With the exception of palm and coconut, oils are nutrition experts' preferred choice for cooking and flavoring foods. But you don't need to give up butter or margarine in the name of heart health. Just limit their intake, and choose soft spreads more often.

Low Cholesterol: Get Cooking!

Bissex advises several approaches to low-cholesterol cooking:

- Use less fat and oil in recipes. Reduce the amount of stick margarine called for in a quick bread recipe, for example.
- Substitute healthier options for all the fat a recipe calls for, such as swapping canola oil for shortening.
- Choose healthier options *and* use less, such as using 1/4 cup olive oil instead of 1/2 cup butter.

Newgent notes that you can also swap out some fat in favor of a fat-free alternative. For example, applesauce or fat-free sour cream can replace part of the fat called for in recipes for pancakes and muffins.

Whatever method you choose, the result is the same: less saturated and trans fat in your foods.

Low Cholesterol: Get Cooking! continued...

Here are some healthy swaps for low-cholesterol cooking from our nutrition experts:

Instead of:	Try:
1 cup sour cream	1 cup low-fat Greek-style yogurt
1 Tbsp. butter (for sauteing) oil	1 tsp. butter + 1 1/2 tsp. canola or any vegetable oil
1/2 cup butter (in quick bread)	1/2 cup canola or vegetable oil
	-OR 1/4 cup canola oil + 1/4 cup unsweetened applesauce
	-OR 1/2 cup soft spread
	-OR 1/4 cup canola oil + 1/4 cup mashed banana
silken tofu	-OR 1/4 cup butter + 1/4 cup drained, pureed
1/2 cup butter (in brownies)	1/4 cup oil + 3 Tbsp. pureed dried plums

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1/2 cup butter (in cookies)

1 cup light or heavy cream

1 cup whole milk

1/4 cup oil + 3 Tbsp. applesauce

1 cup evaporated fat-free milk

1 cup plain, unsweetened nondairy beverage
(like soy or almond milk)

-OR 1 cup 1% low-fat milk