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Choosing a Good Oil

By Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

There are lots of kinds of oils to choose from for cooking and salad dressings. Here are some guidelines on how to make a good choice.

First, choosing liquid oil over fat in solid form, such as butter, margarine, shortening, or lard, is generally a step in the right direction. Liquid oils are, for the most part, lower in saturated and trans fat and higher in mono- and polyunsaturated fat. Saturated and trans fats are the ones that the body uses to form cholesterol and can increase LDL, the bad cholesterol. Polyunsaturated fat is the one that is considered the most heart healthy choice. The exception to the ‘oil is better’ rule is coconut, palm, and palm kernel oil because they are high in saturated fat, ranging from 52–92%.

So then from among the many other oils, which are good choices? Flaxseed oil is particularly high in polyunsaturated fat at 75%. It is also high in omega-3 fatty acids, another heart healthy choice. But because it is highly perishable (keep refrigerated) and because it does not handle the heat of cooking well, it is best used for adding its nutty flavor to salads and such.

According to Alice Lichtenstein, director of Tufts University’s Cardiovascular Nutrition Laboratory, “The most cost/health effective advice is to buy quart bottles of soybean oil which is an excellent source of polyunsaturated fats that have been associated with lower risk of developing cardiovascular disease. For special uses,” she adds, “particularly flavor, buy smaller bottles of oils such as sesame and olive.” Corn oil, safflower and sunflower oils are also low in saturated fat and are good, inexpensive choices.

When it comes to olive oil, Jeffrey B Blumberg, director of Tufts’ Antioxidants Research Laboratory, points out that, “the types of extraction and processing affect the phenolic content of olive oil.” He recommends that ‘cold-pressed’ generally has the least loss of these important nutrients.

Overall when choosing an oil, keep in mind that whatever type of oil or fat is consumed, it contains 90 calories per tablespoon so use sparingly.

For more information on choosing oils or on any other topic contact me, Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition Specialist, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local MU Extension office.

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