

Healthy Oils and Fats for Cooking

If you haven't heard by now, fat is your friend!

Dietary fat provides energy, supports cell maintenance, enhances nutrient absorption, and is essential for producing some hormones.

Dietary fat got a bad reputation back when, blamed for increasing rates of obesity and heart disease. Now, thanks to science and the increasing popularity of fat-containing diets, like Paleo and Keto, we know fat is an essential nutrient and a critical component of a healthy diet.

However, not all fats are created equal. Some fats come with extra health benefits and some can be harmful to your health and should be avoided all together.

One of the best ways to include healthy fats in your diet is using high quality cooking oils. When it comes to cooking, the type of cooking and amount of heat matter when selecting which oil to cook with.

In general, oils that are highly processed should be avoided. These include vegetable oil blends, like canola, soybean, sunflower, and safflower oils.

These oils undergo chemical and high heat processes during production, which often turns the oils rancid – aka full of oxidation, trans fat, and other inflammatory byproducts that aren't good for your body.

Oils that have a low smoke point or contain a high percentage of polyunsaturated fatty acids, like walnut and flaxseed oil, shouldn't be used for cooking. That's because heat damages the flavor and nutrition profile of these oils and causes the formation of unhealthy free radicals. These oils are best used in applications like salad dressing, dips, and smoothies.

There are a few tried and true oils that lend flavor and nutrition no matter what cooking method you're using. The oils/fats listed below provide flavor and nutrition in cooking applications.

OLIVE OIL

The monounsaturated fats found in olive oil are linked to reduced inflammation, decreased risk of heart disease, improved triglycerides and cholesterol levels, and many of the other health benefits associated with the Mediterranean diet.

Olive oil is best for low-heat cooking, such as a quick sauté or baking at 350 degrees and below. It has a low smoke point, which means **high temperatures will cause olive oil to degrade, so it shouldn't be used in high heat roasting or frying, or long sautés.**

Extra virgin olive oil is the oil of choice for salad dressings and can also be used to "finish" a dish – drizzle on top of dips, soups, pastas, and vegetables.

AVOCADO OIL

Rich in monounsaturated fatty acids, avocado oil may also help improve cholesterol levels.

Unlike olive oil, **avocado oil has a high smoke point and can be used for high heat sautéing and roasting.** It has a mild flavor that makes it a good choice for use in baked goods as well.

COCONUT OIL

Coconut oil is a solid at room temperature and liquid oil when heated. **It has a medium smoke point, making it another good choice for everything from sautés to baking.** Coconut oil is a great vegan alternative to butter in baked goods.

There's some disagreement over the health benefits of coconut oil since it's high in saturated fat, with 12 grams per tablespoon.

High intakes of saturated fat are linked to increased risk of heart disease, but some experts say **the medium-chain fatty acid found in coconut oil are not metabolized or stored the same way as saturated fat from animal products.**

We do need some saturated fat in our diets, and coconut oil is a smart choice for many people.

The bottom line? Like most things, coconut oil is fine for most people in moderation.

One word of caution - virgin coconut oil will lend a coconut aroma and flavor to whatever you cook in it. Choose refined coconut oil if you're not a fan of coconut flavor.

GRASS-FED BUTTER OR GHEE

I am just going to say it – you can't beat the taste of butter.

Yes, it has saturated fat. And, just like with coconut oil, moderation is key. So is quality.

Choose grass-fed butter and ghee (clarified butter) products for an extra dose of omega-3 fats.

Butter is best used for lower heat cooking and baking, but ghee can be used for higher heat cooking, since the milk solids that are prone to browning and burning have been removed.

Unlike butter, ghee does not require refrigerator, and can be stored in a cool, dark place like a pantry.

ANIMAL FATS — LARD, TALLOW, BACON DRIPPINGS

The fatty acid content of animals tends to vary depending on what the animals eat. If they eat a lot of grains, the fats will contain quite a bit of polyunsaturated fats.

If the animals are pastured raised or grass-fed, there will be more saturated and monounsaturated fats in them.

Therefore, animal fats from animals that are naturally raised are excellent options for cooking. You should avoid using the fat from conventionally raised animals.

You can buy ready-made lard or tallow from the store, or you can save the drippings from meat to use at a later time. Bacon drippings are especially tasty.

PROPER STORAGE PRACTICES

To make sure that your fats and oils don't go rancid, it is important to keep a few things in mind.

Don't buy large batches at a time. Buy smaller ones, that way you will most likely use them **before** they get the chance to damage.

In addition, **fat tends to absorb chemicals, pesticides, and additives more readily, so whenever possible, purchase your fats in glass,** rather than plastic, containers.

When it comes to unsaturated fats like olive, avocado oil and some others, it is important to keep them in an environment where they are less likely to oxidize and go rancid. Choose those in dark, glass bottles and store away from the stove or other potentially hot areas of the kitchen (like on the counter above the dishwasher).

The main drivers behind oxidative damage of cooking oils are heat, oxygen, and light.

Therefore, keep them in a **cool, dry, dark place** and make sure to screw the lid on as soon as you're done using them.

BOTTOM LINE

Instead of focusing on just one type of cooking fat, using a variety of oils and fats in your cooking will help you receive the nutritional, flavor, and cooking benefits each has to offer.

Purchase high quality products from reputable, sustainable producers, and store in cool, dry, dark place for best results.