

Refined vs. unrefined oils

As with flours or sweeteners, oils can be refined by a process that removes the “impurities” that give an oil its naturally occurring flavor, color and nutrients. In exchange, the oil becomes stable at higher temperatures. Refined oil is not necessarily a bad thing. Many types of foods we like to eat are cooked at high temperatures and require oils that can safely withstand high heat. For low- or no-heat applications, unrefined oils are superior since they contribute flavor and nutrients essential to a healthy diet.

Cooking with butter, lard or ghee

In addition to vegetable oils, people traditionally have used animal fats to cook food. Fats such as butter, lard, suet and ghee (refined or clarified butter) can be a healthy addition to your diet and, in many cases, are preferable to partially-hydrogenated vegetable shortenings (trans fats) that are marketed as alternatives to these traditional fats.

STORAGE TIPS

The packaging and storage of oils affects their quality. Exposure to heat, oxygen and light can cause oil to go rancid, or spoil. All oils should be stored in cool, dark places away from sources of heat and light and most unrefined oils should be kept in the refrigerator. Read the product label if you are unsure whether to refrigerate it or not.

Unrefined oils will keep four to six months if stored properly. Refined or heavily processed oils will keep twice as long.

Vegetable shortening, margarine and partially-hydrogenated oils (trans fats)

In order to stabilize oils and preserve their shelf life, food scientists developed a method called “hydrogenation” which adds hydrogen to the molecular structure of vegetable oils. This renders oils solid at room temperature (vegetable shortening is an example). This process produces “trans fats.” According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), trans fat raises low-density lipoprotein (LDL) or “bad cholesterol” in the blood and increases the risk of heart disease. For many years, trans fats have been the primary choice for processed and packaged baked goods as well as commercial deep fat frying. Since 2006, FDA has required that trans fat quantities be listed on the Nutrition Facts label of packaged foods.

Resources

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

Trans fats
www.fda.gov



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Oils



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Vegetable oils

are one of the best ways to meet your body's daily requirement for essential fats. Different oils work better for different types of cooking; learning which types to use for which applications will help you maximize the health benefits of each oil. Here is an overview of types of vegetable oils you might find at your co-op and which applications are suited for each.

Avocado oil is extracted from the fruit of avocados. Refined avocado oil has a neutral flavor, while unrefined avocado oil tastes buttery and slightly fruity. Both types can be used to sauté, fry, roast and bake.

Canola oil is extracted from the seed of the mustard plant. It has a neutral flavor and is suitable for high-heat cooking, including baking, sautéing and roasting.

Coconut oil is extracted from the flesh of coconuts. Refined coconut oil has a neutral flavor, but unrefined coconut oil tastes and smells strongly of coconut. Both types can be used for high-heat applications like frying, sautéing, baking and roasting.

Corn oil is extracted from corn kernels. Refined corn oil has a neutral flavor and is good for baking or frying. Unrefined corn oil has a strong corn flavor and is good for salad dressings and sauces with southwestern flavors.

Grape seed oil is extracted from grape seeds. It has a light, neutral flavor and can be used similarly to olive oil. Good for sautéing, baking and as a base for salad dressings.

Palm oil is extracted from the fruit pulp of oil palm trees. Refined palm oil is used in many processed and packaged products, especially as an alternative to partially-hydrogenated oils. Unrefined palm oil is intensely red in color and is rich in beta carotene. Sourcing of palm oil is controversial because commercial production has resulted in deforestation and destruction of rainforest habitats. To address these concerns, choose only Fair Trade palm oils, which are produced sustainably.

Peanut oil is extracted from peanuts. Refined peanut oil has a mild, neutral flavor and is excellent for frying and sautéing. Unrefined peanut oil is flavorful and can also be used for frying to give foods a nutty, rich flavor. Roasted peanut oil is pressed from roasted peanuts and is very flavorful. It should be used as a condiment, drizzled on cooked vegetables, grains and meats.

Olive oil is extracted from fresh olives and is a great all-purpose oil that can be used for low- to medium-heat frying and sautéing. Extra virgin olive oil comes from the first pressing of the fruit and has a very delicate, fruity flavor that is best for salads, sauces and spreads or to dress pasta, vegetables, bread or grains.

Safflower oil is extracted from the seeds of the safflower plant. It has a neutral flavor and can be used for high-heat sautéing, roasting and baking.

Sesame oil is extracted from sesame seeds. Refined sesame oil (or light sesame oil) has a mild flavor and is suitable for up to medium-heat sautéing. Unrefined sesame oil (or dark sesame oil) has a stronger flavor and is best used as a condiment. Toasted sesame oil is extracted from toasted sesame seeds and has a rich, aromatic flavor; use it as a condiment in dipping sauces or drizzled on cooked vegetables, meats and grains.

Soybean oil is extracted from soybeans. It is one of the most widely used vegetable oils and is found in many different types of processed and packaged foods, from baked goods to salad dressings. If using at home, choose a high-quality soybean oil and use for baking, frying or sautéing.

Sunflower oil is extracted from sunflower seeds. It is mild and neutral in flavor and is a good all-purpose cooking oil for almost any use except deep frying. Available in regular and high-oleic forms, which refers to the oleic acid content of the oil, or amount of monounsaturated fat.

Seasoning and supplemental oils

Some types of oil are not meant to be cooked, but instead are used as a seasoning to contribute flavor to foods, dressings and dips. Many of these oils are also used as dietary supplements, such as those containing omega-3 essential fatty acids (EFAs). These include flaxseed oil, hemp seed oil, pumpkin seed oil and walnut oil. Fish oil is a common supplemental oil because it contains a high amount of omega-3 EFAs. Due to its strong fish flavor, it is not desirable for culinary purposes.

