

The Truth About Tropical Oils

Palm oil, palm kernel oil and coconut oil are often referred to as tropical oils. Unlike vegetable oils, they contain significant quantities of saturated fat. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans¹ recommend limiting intake of fats and oils high in saturated and/or trans fatty acids, and choosing products low in such fats and oils. Tropical oils are not typically sold on supermarket shelves; instead, they are used mainly as ingredients in prepared foods such as crackers, cookies, ice cream, non-dairy creamers and chocolate coating on snack bars. Tropical oils may also be used as a replacement for partially hydrogenated vegetable oils in foods to reduce the trans fat. Food products that contain large amounts of tropical oils may be high in saturated fat, thus conflicting with current nutrition recommendations from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans¹. However, some foods may contain very small amounts of tropical oils and can still be recommended with confidence, based on their overall nutrient composition.

Reduction of saturated fat recommended

The current nutrition recommendations promote a diet with 20 to 35 percent of calories coming from fat and no more than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans also cite primary sources of saturated fat in the diet from animal products, including cheese, beef and milk.¹ In a recent report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service on food consumption trends, saturated fat accounted for 31 percent of the fat available in the diet per day, which exceeds the guideline recommendations.² The 2009 International Food Information Council Food & Health Survey indicates that consumers are concerned about the amount and type of fat they consume, but the understanding of different types of dietary fats, such as unsaturated fats, still appears to be lacking.³

Fats and oils are part of a healthful diet, but it's the type of fat that makes a difference. To meet the total fat recommendation of 20 to 35 percent of calories, most dietary sources should come from unsaturated fat—poly and monounsaturated fats such as fish, nuts and vegetable oils. Replacing saturated fat with similar amounts of

unsaturated fats may help maintain heart health. To achieve this benefit, total daily calories should not increase.

Role of tropical oils

When tropical oils are used as an ingredient in a food, it is important to consider the overall net contribution these oils make to the fat composition of the final product. For example, non-hydrogenated soft spreads are recommended as a replacement for butter as they are 70 percent lower in saturated fat, and contain no cholesterol or trans fat per serving*. In order to make a non-hydrogenated soft spread, a small amount of naturally solid palm or palm kernel oil is blended with other liquid vegetable oils such as soybean or canola oils. Palm and palm kernel oils are effective as a firming ingredient. A very small amount of palm and palm kernel oils is needed; harder fats are needed to provide the desirable texture of a non-hydrogenated soft spread as well as to minimize the combined amount of saturated fat and trans fat.

The alternative to using tropical oils in a soft spread would be to use partially hydrogenated oils. During the partial hydrogenation, both trans fat and saturated fat are formed. A recent WHO scientific update on trans fatty acids concluded that trans fatty acids from partially hydrogenated oils negatively affect cardiovascular risk factors, contributing to an increased risk of coronary heart disease. The recommendation was to not only remove trans fats in the diet, but to replace them with oils rich in omega-3 and omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) and monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFA).⁴

Recommendations

Consumers concerned about heart health should read the Nutrition Facts Panel for the overall fat composition in a product. (For an example, see the Nutrition Facts Panel for Promise® Buttery Spread.) Because certain fats are necessary in the diet, consumers should look for products that have more polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats, less saturated and no trans fats.

You can recommend with confidence a non-hydrogenated soft spread that is 70 percent lower in saturated fat than butter and contains no cholesterol or trans fat per

serving*. A very small amount of palm and palm kernel oil blended with liquid vegetable oil is acceptable.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 TBSP (14g)	
Servings Per Container SEE BELOW	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 80	Calories from Fat 80
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Total Fat 8.0g	% Daily Value*
Saturated Fat 1.5g	12%
Trans Fat 0g	8%
Polyunsaturated Fat 4.0g	
Monounsaturated Fat 3.0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 85mg	4%
Total Carbohydrate 0g	0%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Sugars 0g	
Protein 0g	
<hr/>	
Vitamin A 10%	Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 0%	Iron 0%
Vitamin D 20%	Vitamin E 15%
Vitamin B6 35%	Vitamin B12 20%

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.

Summary

For people following a heart-healthy diet, recommend foods that are lower in saturated fat (than butter, for example) and contain no trans fat. It is also important to recommend dietary fats such as polyunsaturated fats. Research shows that omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids play a role in maintaining heart health as part of a diet low in saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol.⁵

The presence of palm oil and palm kernel oil in a food ingredient list should not cause alarm. What is important is the total fat profile of the food as shown on the Nutrition Facts Panel.

When consumers are looking for a soft spread suitable for a heart-healthy diet, suggest a soft spread that is non-hydrogenated, contains 2 grams or less of saturated and zero trans fats.

1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005. Available at <http://www.health.gov/DietaryGuidelines/>

2 Wells, Hodan F., and Jean C. Buzby. *Dietary Assessment of Major Trends in U.S. Food Consumption, 1970-2005*, Economic Information Bulletin No. 33. Economic Research Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture. March 2008.

3 International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation 2009 Food & Health Survey. Available at: <http://www.ific.org/research/foodandhealthsurvey.cfm>

4 R. Uauy, A.Aro, R.Clarke et al. (2009) WHO Scientific Update on trans fatty acids: summary and conclusions. *Eur.J.Clin.Nutr.* 63,S68-S75.

5 Harris WS, Mozaffarian D, Rimm E, et al. Omega-6 fatty acids and risk for cardiovascular disease: A science advisory from the American Heart Association Nutrition Subcommittee of the Council on Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Metabolism; Council on Cardiovascular Nursing; and Council on Epidemiology and Prevention. *Circulation.* 2009;119:902-907.

*Promise®, Country Crock®, I Can't Believe It's Not Butter® and Brummel & Brown® soft spreads range from 0-8 g of fat and 0-2 g of saturated fat per serving.