

Published: December 8, 2013 12:49 IST | Updated: December 8, 2013 12:49 IST

Is oil healthy?

GEETA PADMANABHAN



Should we avoid oil altogether? Geeta Padmanabhan meets experts who have some interesting tips for the diet-conscious

At the TCS complex, Chennai One, cardiologist Dr. Chockalingam munches a samosa, with a piece of chocolate cake waiting for its turn. Is that a medical certificate for what he is eating? He laughs and says, “Everything in moderation.” Our conversation — with Dr. Priya Chockalingam joining in — moves on to the use of cooking oil. Doesn’t our approach to it swing from one extreme to another? Is oil good, bad, or ugly?

“Before diving into oil, it’s important to understand that what we eat should provide us with carbohydrates, fats, proteins, water (macronutrients), vitamins and minerals (micronutrients),” says Dr. Priya, cardiac wellness physician. “These are essential nutrients that we cannot produce internally. We have to get them from our diet.” We need monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFA) and polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA); we can synthesise saturated fats (SFs). They are bad only when consumed in excess.

Types of fats in oil

“There is no way we can afford to avoid oil at any stage of our lives,” says Varsha, consultant nutritionist. “Lipids (oils plus solid fats at room temperature, 1 gram = 9 calories), besides giving us energy, are sources of fatty acids (its deficiency results in major health problems), and fat-soluble vitamins (A, D and K).”

Oils consist of MUFA/PUFA/SF in varying proportions, but in general, their SF content is low. Animal-based fats like butter and ghee, in contrast, are rich in SFs. Nuts, types of fish, and vegetables like avocado and olives have a lot of oil content. Plant-based fats increase good cholesterol (HDL) and decrease bad cholesterol. However, cholesterol is not part of the plant kingdom, is not derived directly from any nuts/seeds you munch. Yet, “HDL is indispensable for tissue function and cell memory,” says Dr. Chockalingam.

Only 20-30 per cent of our daily calories should come from fat, but we make it much higher. Excess fat is stored where we don’t want it, gets deposited in the arterial walls and blocks blood flow. Heart attack, stroke, breast/ovarian cancer, diabetes, hypertension, unhealthy weight gain, and joint pain are some of the ill effects associated with excessive fat consumption.

But if you totally avoid oil/oily natural items like nuts and fish, you’ll miss out on the MUFAs and PUFAs you need. The solution? “Balance intake, use oil wisely” — the principles of how we use what we eat is the same for all ages, says Dr. Priya. “Practise balanced healthy eating; keep oils to the bare minimum.” Oils have a lot of calories, “approximately 120 calories / tablespoon.” Excess oil, not burnt by physical activity, leads to unhealthy weight gain. Together with a sedentary lifestyle, it is a “killing combination.” “Develop a good mindset, exercise, desist from active/passive smoking and alcohol, and it will help HDL,” says Dr. Chockalingam.

Guidelines

How much oil is too much? “Recent healthy eating guidelines suggest using more than one type of oil in your daily diet,” Dr. Priya says. Sesame (nallennai), canola and olive oils have a lot of MUFAs — use them for salads and mild cooking. Sunflower, safflower and rice-bran oils have a lot of PUFAs — buy one for regular cooking. Trans-fat, found in hydrogenated vegetable oils and solid fats is too much in re-used cooking oils and burgers and pizzas. Trans-fat is bad — just stay away from it.

What is good for kids? Their energy requirement depends on their age (0-18) and physical/mental development, says Varsha. There are invisible and visible sources of lipids in diets, but a benchmark is a visible addition of 30-50 grams oils/day. She adds an interesting footnote: “As long as the plate and hands don’t require soap to clean up, one is doing good. And don’t fry all items at every meal.” Oils providing monounsaturates/polyunsaturates/saturates in the ratio of 1.5:1:1 is the recommendation.

Oils that are healthy at room temperature can become unhealthy when heated to certain temperatures, says Varsha. When oil is heated repeatedly, the proportion of harmful disintegrated parts increases. After deep-frying in it once/twice, use that oil for something else; don’t top it with fresh oil. Dietary-fat studies in UK/USA/Spain show polyunsaturated oils like soya, canola, sunflower, corn oils degrade easily to toxic compounds when heated. Prolonged consumption of any burnt oil leads to atherosclerosis, inflammatory joint disease and birth defects.

The final word? Peanut, mustard, coconut, and gingelly oil, used in different parts of India, are routine oils, she says. “Olive oil is the favourite in Mediterranean climes, where it is never exposed to heat. It is expensive and dangerous in Indian cuisines. Rice-bran is a speciality oil, and you know, coconut oil is re-emerging as the winner.”

Keywords: [cooking oil benefits](#), [cooking oil usage](#)

Printable version | Apr 1, 2014 10:14:56 AM | <http://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/fitness/is-oil-healthy/article5433471.ece>

© The Hindu