Which Are the Best Cooking Oils?

By Dr. Ramona Warren

*Patients often ask me which oils are the healthiest to use when cooking. This can be a confusing subject since there are so many different options, and marketing companies are focused on getting people to buy their “healthy” oil. Take canola oil, which is often marketed as a healthy choice, low in saturated fat and boasting healthy omega-3 fatty acids. However, have you ever wondered where canola oil comes from? What is a “canola?” Well, there is no canola plant. Canola oil comes from rapeseed. The oil from the rapeseed plant is not a food, but an industrial oil used in lubricants, biofuels, soaps, inks, lipstick and candles. Canola actually stands for “Canadian oil low acid.” It is a genetically modified version of rapeseed oil that is low in cost because it is subsidized by the Canadian government. The low cost of canola oil is why it is used in most packaged and processed foods.*

*The following article by Tatum Young, entitled “The Ultimate Guide to Cooking Healthy with Oils and Fats,” provides some excellent guidelines on this issue, so I am reprinting it below:*

When it comes to selecting oils and fats for cooking, there are plenty of options to choose from. And while the flavor an oil imparts on a dish plays an important role in what you opt for, your choice should be based on a lot more than that.

First, you need to consider what oils stand up to high heat. When cooking at high temperatures, you want to use oils that are stable and don't oxidize or go rancid easily. Oils that oxidize (react with oxygen to form free radicals and harmful compounds) you certainly don't want to be consuming.  These compounds cause the body to break down faster, making the body more susceptible to inflammation, degenerative diseases and accelerated aging

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So what are the safest, healthiest oils and fats you can use while cooking?

1. **Coconut Oil**. Coconut oil is your best choice when it comes to high-heat cooking - and given its numerous benefits, it’s an oil you'll want to use time and time again. It can be used for sautéing, roasting, frying, baking and grilling. It is also rich in healthy saturated fats, fat-soluble vitamins, antioxidants and valuable compounds for weight loss. At room temperature, the oil is semi-solid, meaning that it can last for months and years, without going rancid.
2. **Palm Oil**. Derived from the fruit of oil palms, consists mostly of saturated fats, with small amounts of polyunsaturated fats, making it a good choice for cooking. It is pretty nutritious and especially rich in Vitamin E. The primary concern to consider when using palm oil, however, is that growing these trees mean less environment available for orangutans, which are an endangered species.
3. **Butter**. It may have been demonized in the past, due to its saturated content, but real butter (not processed margarine) is actually quite nutritious. It is a good source of vitamins A, E and K. It is also rich in Conjugated Linoleic Acid (CLA), which has been shown to lower body fat percentage, and Butyrate, which has been shown to fight inflammation and improve gut health. Butter does tend to burn when cooked at high heat. So, if opting for butter, be sure to keep the fire down and watch for smoke. Alternatively, you can use ghee (purified butter) - you'll get the same (or at least, extremely similar) flavor, without the burn.
4. **Avocado Oil**. When cooking at very high temperatures, avocado oil is a very stable oil to use. It can be used in searing, roasting, and frying, and can stand up to temperatures as high as 520°F. Avocado oil contains a high concentration of monounsaturated fats (good and healthy fats - a necessary requirement in a healthy diet), potassium and vitamins A, E, and D. If you're new to avocado oil and are a little unsure about its taste, use it to sauté vegetables first.
5. **Animal Fats**. Animal fat has been shunned in the past due to its saturated fat content and high serum cholesterol levels. However, fear of saturated fat is beginning to diminish as more studies are showing such foods are not the culprit for heart disease or obesity. So long as they are consumed wisely and moderately, animal fats like lard or tallow are great for high-heat cooking, and are not considered to be an unhealthy option if sourced from animals consuming a natural diet (grass-fed), living in a natural environment.
6. **Olive Oil**. Olive oil has numerous health benefits and is an exceptionally heart-healthy oil. It has been shown to raise HDL (good) cholesterol and lower the amount of oxidized LDL cholesterol. Most sources, however, indicate that olive oil can stand up to heats of 320°F - and should preferably be used as a dressing. Though there are some olive oils on the market (virgin and refined) that are more suitable for high-heat cooking (they can stand up to temperatures as high as 400°F), these oils are inferior in nutritive properties. So, if opting for a low-quality olive oil, make sure it is either expeller or cold-pressed.
7. **Seed Oils**. Seed oils are often refined with chemicals, bleaches, and deodorizers. These oils are generally used in high-heat commercial cooking due to their ability to withstand high temperatures and their cheap prices. Because oils like soybean, canola, corn, safflower, grapeseed and vegetable oils are extracted from tiny seeds, they are often refined, using many chemical extractions.