

# Cooking With Oil

## Everything You Need to Know About Healthy Cooking Oils

By Heidi Reichenberger-McIndoo, MS, RD, LDN

**W**hile shopping today, I counted no less than fifteen types of cooking oils on my grocer's shelves. And if your store is anything like mine, it has just as many, if not more.

Reasons for choosing one oil over another range from nutritional quality and cooking ability to flavor and price. Bottom line, everyone's needs are different and there may not be just one that is the best for you. In fact, right now, I have five kinds of oil in my cupboard and I use all of them regularly. So how should you decide which oils to use when you cook? First, you need to understand their differences.

### NUTRITIONAL PROFILE

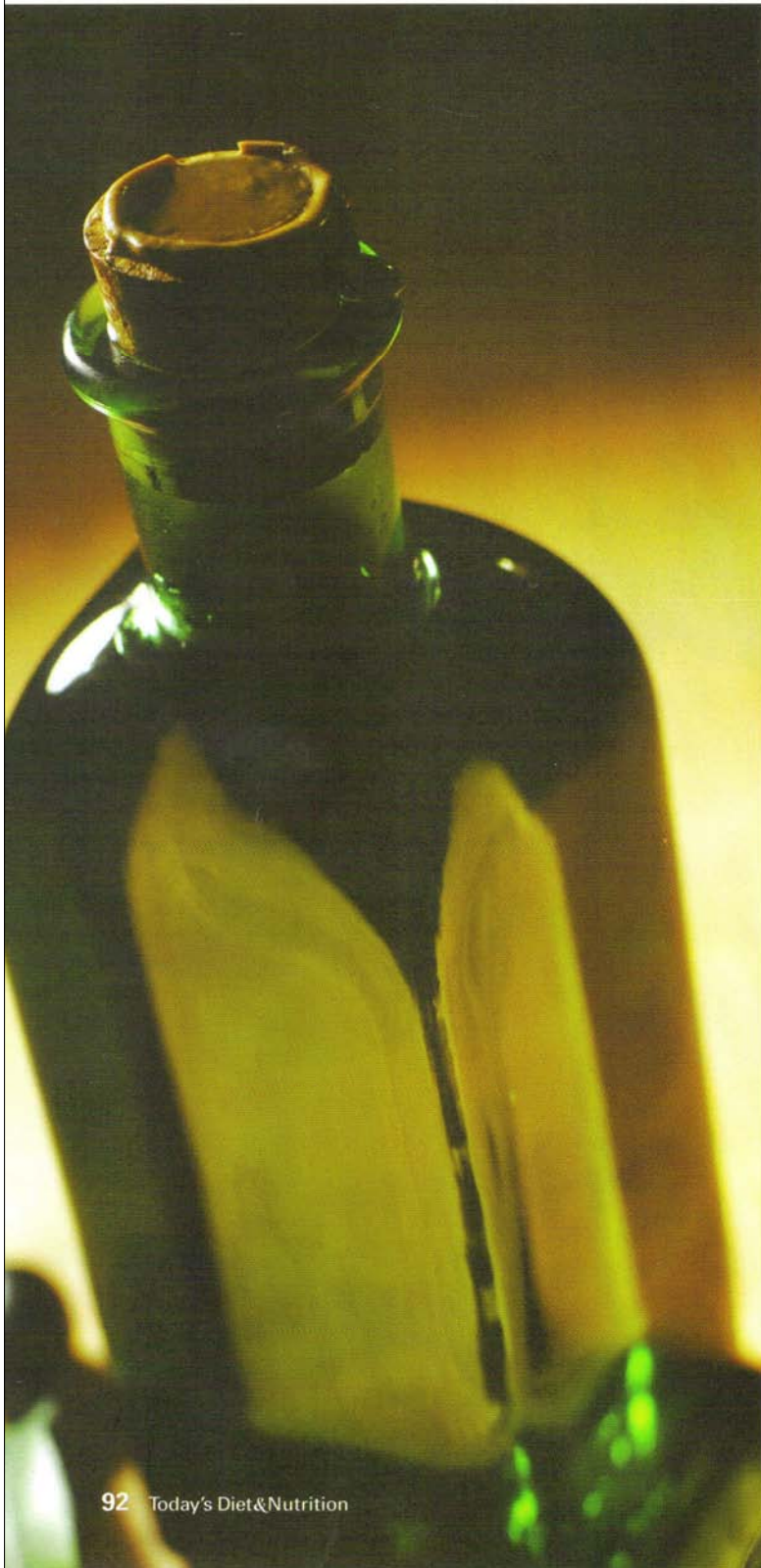
Many of us choose a cooking oil based on how it may affect our health—and for good reason. Cooking oil is one hundred percent fat, and we all know that fat is bad for our hearts and our waistlines. Therefore, choosing the least harmful is certainly a good idea.

Surprisingly, most oils are similar in many ways, including calorie content. Oils differ mainly in the type of fat they contain, and this is where the “healthy” and “unhealthy” labels come into play.

Four main types of fat found in food are polyunsaturated, monounsaturated, saturated, and trans fats. What differentiates these fats is their chemical makeup. Most oils contain some sort of combination of these types of fats. So, what's what?

Monounsaturated fats are considered very healthy. They help lower your total blood cholesterol level as well as your low-density lipoprotein—or “bad” cholesterol, while at the same time helping to raise your high-density lipoprotein—or “good” cholesterol, which decreases your risk of heart disease.

Polyunsaturated fats are also in the healthy category and lower both your total and bad cholesterol levels.



Healthy fat may seem to be an oxymoron, but our bodies need some fat. “We can take in up to thirty-five percent of our calories from fat as long as we try to keep trans fats as low as possible and saturated fats to ten percent or less of total calories,” according to Cynthia Sass, RD, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. Moreover, fats are a good source of certain vitamins, including the antioxidant vitamin E.

Saturated fat was long considered the lone bad guy of the fat world. This unhealthy fat raises both your total and bad cholesterol levels and, in doing so, increases your risk of heart disease.

Trans fat, however, is the latest nutritional villain. Not only does it raise your bad cholesterol levels, but it also lowers your good cholesterol levels. Fortunately, cooking oils don’t contain any of these baddies.

### COOKING QUALITIES

How you’re going to use your oil should influence your choice. Some oils perform better at high temperatures than do others. Cooking oils have what’s called a *smoke point*—the temperature at which they begin to smoke. For example, butter and margarine smoke and burn at around 302 degrees Fahrenheit. On the other hand, olive oil smokes at closer to 375 degrees Fahrenheit and peanut oil at 448 degrees Fahrenheit, making them better for sautéing and frying, respectively. While deep frying isn’t considered a healthy cooking method, if on occasion you choose to prepare food that way, it’s important to select an oil that will heat to the necessary temperature. Deep frying in oil that isn’t hot enough can cause your food to absorb more oil, and, thus, cause you to absorb more fat.

Refined cooking oils are light and pale in both color and flavor and are good for all types of cooking. Unrefined oils have much stronger flavors as well as lower smoke points and are best suited for dressings, marinades, sauces, and other low temperature cooking.

### FLAVOR

The taste of an oil, of course, is crucial when you cook. Some oils, such as canola, impart very little, if any, flavor to your dishes. However, sesame and truffle oils have quite strong flavors of their own. It’s an especially important consideration when your recipe calls for half a cup of oil as opposed to a mere drizzle.

### PRICE

Price may or may not be a key consideration for you; however, it is a useful indicator of the way an oil is best used. For example, an oil that costs only a few dollars for a large quantity is most likely meant to be used in larger quantities. On the other hand, an oil that costs several dollars for a small quantity is probably meant to be used as a garnish.

Because prices are different across the country, this guide will give you an idea of the price range for eight ounces of a particular oil:

\$	\$0.60 to \$2.00
\$\$	\$2.00 to \$4.00
\$\$\$	\$4.00 to \$7.00
\$\$\$\$	\$7.00 to \$25.00
\$\$\$\$\$	> \$25.00

*Here’s a rundown of the key qualities of the most common cooking oils to help you select the best oil for the cooking job at hand:*

### Avocado oil \$\$\$\$

A light buttery or nutty flavor, best for salad dressings, as a condiment, and for cooking at very high temperatures

- Smoke point of 520 degrees Fahrenheit
- Composed primarily of monounsaturated fat—seventy percent, with ten percent polyunsaturated, and twenty percent saturated

### Canola oil \$

Because it’s almost flavorless, it can be used for a variety of different cooking methods, including sautéing and baking, and in salad dressings

- Smoke point for unrefined oil is 225 degrees, semirefined 350 degrees, and refined 400 degrees
- Composed of sixty-two percent monounsaturated fats, thirty-two percent polyunsaturated, and six percent saturated

### Corn oil \$

A tasteless oil most often used for frying, baking, and in salad dressings

- Smoke point of 320 degrees for unrefined and 450 degrees for refined
- Composed of twenty-five percent monounsaturated fats, sixty-two percent polyunsaturated, and thirteen percent saturated

### Enova \$

With a mild flavor similar to canola or vegetable oil, this oil is appropriate for baking, grilling, frying, and for salad dressings

- Smoke point of 420 degrees
- Composed of thirty-six percent monounsaturated fats, fifty-seven percent polyunsaturated, and seven percent saturated

Enova is a unique combination of soy and canola oils formulated to contain more of a specific type of fat molecule, diacylglycerol (DAG), than that found in traditional cooking oils. Our bodies metabolizes DAG fat differently than they do triacylglycerol, the predominate fat molecule in most cooking oils. As a result of this difference, less oil is stored as fat in the body when you cook with this oil. (I’ve done a bit of work for Enova and I cook with it for my family.)

### Grapeseed oil \$\$\$

A light, neutral-tasting oil that can be used for baking, grilling, frying, and salad dressings

- Smoke point of 320 degrees »



- Composed of twenty-one percent monounsaturated fats, seventy-one percent polyunsaturated, and seven percent saturated

**Macadamia nut oil \$\$**

Buttery, light flavor appropriate for baking, grilling, stir-frying, pan-frying, and in salad dressings and marinades

- Smoke point of 410 degrees
- Composed of eighty-three percent monounsaturated fats, three percent polyunsaturated, and fourteen percent saturated

**Olive oil \$\$**

Flavor can range from mild to quite strong. "Light" or "lite" on an olive oil's label pertains to flavor and has nothing to do with fat or calorie content. Extra virgin olive oil is obtained from the first pressing of the olives. It is also the least acidic and most full-flavored of all the types of olive oil. Most often used for sautéing, grilling, or in salad dressing, olive oil is also used for baking with recipes that involve strong flavors such as chocolate or spiced goods.

- Different types of olive oils have different smoke points: basic olive oil smokes at 420 degrees, extra virgin at 320 degrees, and extra light at 468 degrees
- Composed of seventy-seven percent monounsaturated fats, nine percent polyunsaturated, and fourteen percent saturated

**Peanut oil \$**

Mild peanut flavor perfect for frying, it's also used frequently in Asian cooking

- Smoke point of 320 degrees for unrefined and 450 degrees for refined
- Composed of forty-nine percent monounsaturated fats, thirty-three percent polyunsaturated, and eighteen percent saturated

**Rice bran oil \$\$**

Light nutty flavor good for frying foods at high temperatures as well as for sautéing

- Smoke point of 490 degrees
- Composed of forty-two percent monounsaturated fats, forty percent polyunsaturated, and eighteen percent saturated

**Safflower oil \$**

Has almost no flavor, making it good for sautéing, frying, and baking

- Smoke point for unrefined oil of 225 degrees, 320 degrees for semirefined, and 450 degrees for refined
- Composed of thirteen percent monounsaturated fats, seventy-seven percent polyunsaturated, and ten percent saturated

**Sesame oil \$\$\$**

A strong nutty flavor that makes it best suited for salad dressings and as a condiment

- Smoke point of 350 degrees for unrefined and 450 degrees for semirefined
- Composed of forty percent monounsaturated fats, forty-six percent polyunsaturated, and fourteen percent saturated

**Truffle oil \$\$\$\$\$**

A very strong, earthy, truffle flavor, use a few drops or drizzle at a time as a flavoring

- The smoke point is extremely low
- Made by soaking truffles in oil (usually olive or grapeseed), therefore the composition depends on the oil with which it is made

**Vegetable oil \$**

A mild flavor makes this a good all-purpose oil for baking, frying, and sautéing

- This is usually a blend of various oils such as corn, soybean, and sunflower, or simply just one of the three. This makes for a high smoke point
- Composition depends on the blend of oils used

**Walnut oil \$\$\$**

With its strong walnut flavor, this oil is best used to flavor baked goods or sauces but can also be used in salad dressings

- Smoke point of 320 degrees for unrefined and 400 degrees for semirefined
- Composed of nineteen percent monounsaturated fats, sixty-seven percent polyunsaturated, and fourteen percent saturated

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