Butter May Be Better Than Vegetable Oil, But Questions Remain

By ACSH Staff — April 15, 2016

Most people take for granted the notion that eating butter leads to a bad heart. As a result, many have turned to vegetable oil as a healthy cooking alternative. Yet a new study this month may show that the opposite is true: butter, in fact, could be better for our health than vegetable oils.

A new study – published April 12 in The British Medical Journal [2] and led by scientists at the National Institutes of Health and the University of North Carolina School of Medicine – found that vegetable oils could actually lead to worse health outcomes than butter. This contradicts the long-held belief that such oils are better because they lead to lower cholesterol levels.

"Since blood cholesterol levels are associated with risk of heart disease and death, the cholesterol-lowering effects of vegetable oils are predicted to decrease the risk of heart disease and death," said the study's lead author Dr. Christopher Ramsden, speaking with U.S. News [3]. Yet according to the study, the cholesterol benefits of vegetable oils may be overshadowed by the risks of their linoleic acid content.

Studying a 50-year-old sample of roughly 9,500 elderly mental hospital and nursing home residents for their serum cholesterol levels, Ramsden and his team found that oils rich in linoleic acid – such as corn oil, soybean oil, and sunflower oil – failed to reduce heart disease risk. In fact, the team found that those who used these oils actually died earlier than those who used the much-stigmatized butter and other saturated fats.

"Altogether, the research leads us to conclude that incomplete publication of important data has contributed to the overestimation of benefits – and the underestimation of potential risks – of replacing saturated fats with vegetable oils rich in linoleic acid," study co-author Daisy Zamora said in a UNC press release [4].

Plenty of controversy, however, surrounds these findings. Such factors as the old age of the participants and the short span of the study seem like faults worth denouncing to some in the field.
"This research cannot be used to draw any conclusions about a healthy diet," Harvard visiting scientist Maryam Farvid told U.S. News. "From the large information from other studies, we know that risk of heart disease will be lower if saturated fats – mainly from red meat and dairy fat – are replaced by unsaturated fats from liquid vegetable oils such as soybean, corn, olive and canola oils for cooking, on salads and at the table."

Despite these disagreements about the comparative effects of vegetable oils and saturated fats on heart health, other recent studies seem to confirm the study’s findings. Last year, for example, the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee 2015 Scientific Report [5] to the USDA stated that saturated fats have no link to heart disease. And among other recent studies, a 2013 BMJ study [6] found that the switch from butter to vegetable oil may actually increase cardiovascular risk.

"There were some differences among these studies, but on the whole they didn’t really disagree," said Zamora about similar past studies.

So the question still remains of whether butter or vegetable oil is better for our health. There may be health pros and cons to both, so until it’s confirmed just use what seems right and tastes best.

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[2] http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.i1246