The oily truth

Eating palm oil leads to higher levels of "bad" cholesterol but it may not be the worst cooking oil, say experts

From Chan Hui

Not all types of cooking oil are equal, and a recent study has shed light on the ubiquity of palm oil’s role in coronary heart disease.

Researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) established that eating palm oil led to higher levels of "bad" cholesterol in the body. This was compared with other types of vegetable oil that contain fewer levels of saturated fat.

The elevated levels of low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol from eating palm oil translated into a 4 per cent higher risk of coronary heart disease incidence and death, they concluded.

These findings were drawn from a meta-analysis on the topic. The study was published last May in The Journal of Nutrition by the American Society for Nutrition.

Despite knowing that palm oil has plenty of harmful saturated fat - about 1 per cent, much higher than other commonly used cooking oils – which can clog up the arteries, researchers have given palm oil a miss.

However, some researchers have cause for optimism in the decisional effects of palm oil.

In addition, not all clinical trials showed a link between palm oil consumption and LDL cholesterol levels, said cardiology Professor Boh Voon Diam of thevore Stock School of Public Health, the principal investigator of the study.

These slivers of doubt prompted him to turn away from a comprehensive review of relevant clinical trials.

Establishing a more definitive conclusion is important, given that palm oil is widely used in Asia, it’s also a highly popular cooking oil in the United States, and the world’s largest producer is Indonesia.

One reason is that palm oil is the cheapest cooking oil. A two-litre bottle costs less than $3.

"Many people use blended oil or vegetable oil for home cooking. These are high in palm oil content," said Prof Diam.

Although small amounts of palm oil are unlikely to have a harmful effect on LDL cholesterol and one of its risk factors, studies of palm oil consumption, many of which use large amounts of palm oil, raise serious issues. "It's addled," said Prof Diam.

A study published in The Lancet in 2016, also in Singapore, accounted for more than 400,000 deaths from heart disease, according to statistics from the Ministry of Health.

A poor ratio of saturated to unsaturated fatty acids in human beings is a risk factor for developing such diseases.

The health dangers of cooking oil products that are high in saturated fat are recognized by the Health Promotion Board (HPB), which started offering subsidies to shops that use healthier oils.

Under the Healthy Ingredien scheme, which was launched in January last year, oil suppliers receive subsidies for selling healthier oil products to restaurants, hawkers and food outlets.

The goal is to improve dietary fat through reducing the intake of saturated fat by partially replacing it with less-protective unsaturated fat, and an HPB preference.

The subsidy is applicable for oils containing at least 55 per cent mono-unsaturated fat.

In addition, the Healthier Choice Symbol helps consumers identify healthier cooking oil products.

One of two cooking oil products sold at supermarkets is now labeled as healthier, said the HPB director.

"We are encouraged to see a strong growth in demand for healthier cooking oil in the supermarkets.

The HPB does not specify the type of polyunsaturated fats that must be used, or the ratio of polyunsaturated fats to saturated fat and mono-unsaturated fat, but it said the type of oil, such as the proportion of unsaturated fat and monounsaturated fat, it may not be the worst cooking oil around.

The NSY study's meta-analysis found that palm oil increased high-density lipoprotein or "good" cholesterol levels when used against cooking oils that are high in trans fats, such as processed meats and poultry.

There was no effect on heart disease risk when palm oil was used against polyunsaturated oils, such as fish oil and coconut oil.

"Polyunsaturated fats can improve heart health, but the evidence is not clear," said Prof Diam.

To provide more clarity, the NUS study plans to assess the effects of palm oil compared to all four types of cooking oils in Singapore.

Know the different guises of palm oil and opt for healthier alternatives

OILS LABELLED “VEGETABLE OIL” OR “BLENDED OIL”

These products tend to have palm oil as their main ingredient. Check the ingredient list if it is palm oil on the label, it means that it is the most abundant oil in the product.

Do not be fooled into thinking that a product is a healthier or unsaturated oil. This is not the case. Take, for instance, palm oil itself which is derived from a single plant species – the oil palm.

OILS LABELLED “MIXED OIL” OR “UNBLEND OIL”

These products contain a mixture of two or more oil types, low in cholesterol.

PROCESSED OR PACKAGED FOOD COOKIES, potato chips, chocolate, peanut butter and instant coffee — all these popular products may be made with palm oil.

If you eat such processed food products regularly, consider looking for a healthier product.

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