

# The Healthiest Cooking Oils

It used to be that when you went to the grocery store to get cooking oil, your choices were vegetable, corn, or olive. Now there's an extensive cooking oil section that also includes nut oils such as walnut and almond as well as avocado, sesame, and hemp oils. It's always good to have options, but if healthy cooking is your goal, figuring out the best choices can be a bit overwhelming. To help, we've picked the cream of the crop. Plus, we give you the inside scoop on why they're so good and the best ways to use them.

## EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE

**HEALTH BENEFITS:** Extra-virgin olive oil has the highest monounsaturated fat content of all the oils—second only to hazelnut, which is much costlier and has a strong flavor, making it less suitable for most cooking. Monounsaturated fats are the healthiest because they offer protection against heart disease. Not only do they help lower total and LDL (“bad”) blood cholesterol levels, they also help raise HDL (“good”) blood cholesterol levels, thereby helping to lower the risk of heart attack or stroke. In addition, more recent research has shown them to be helpful in losing weight and fat, especially around the belly.

**HOW TO COOK WITH IT:** Fairly versatile, olive oil can be used in a variety of ways. It's great for uncooked marinades and dressings, ideal for sautéing, and can even be used in baking; however, for more mild-flavored baked goods, stick to light olive oil, which has a milder flavor. Light, in this case, does not refer to calories or fat but rather to color and flavor. Because of its smoke point, the temperature at which the oil begins to smoke when heated, olive oil is not good for frying.



## CANOLA

**HEALTH BENEFITS:** Another good source of monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFAs), canola oil contains a good amount of polyunsaturated fatty acids as well. Just like monounsaturated fats, they lower blood levels of bad and total cholesterol, but don't raise good cholesterol levels.

**HOW TO COOK WITH IT:** Canola oil can do everything olive oil can and more. It has a higher smoke point, so it can be used for higher temperature sautéing as well as some frying. (But for good health, eat fried foods only occasionally.) Canola oil also has a milder

flavor so it can be used in any kind of baking and cooking without imparting any of its own flavors into the dish.

## FLAXSEED

**HEALTH BENEFITS:** Another oil made up primarily of monounsaturated fats but with its own unique properties, flaxseed oil is a great source of omega-3 fatty acids and lignan, which improve cholesterol and may help prevent cancer, especially, it appears, breast cancer.

**HOW TO COOK WITH IT:** Flaxseed oil is not heat stable, so while it can't be used for cooking, it can be used in salad dressings, marinades, and other sauces that don't require cooking.

## WALNUT

**HEALTH BENEFITS:** Of all oils, walnut oil is among those with the least saturated fat. It's a great source of omega-3 fatty acids, which may help lower blood triglyceride levels and help raise levels of good

cholesterol. They also may help prevent blood from clotting, which in turn lowers the risk of heart attack or stroke.

**HOW TO COOK WITH IT:** Ideal for sauces and dressings, walnut oil also can be used for sautéing and baking. However, it's a bit on the expensive side, so it may be better saved for recipes that call for only small quantities.

## HIGH-OLEIC SUNFLOWER

**HEALTH BENEFITS:** This is an up-and-coming oil. It isn't readily available yet, but it shows tremendous promise. It's higher in MUFAs than regular sunflower oil and has even more than olive oil, and its health benefits are similar to those of olive oil.

**HOW TO COOK WITH IT:** With a neutral flavor and very high smoke point, this oil can be used in any kind of baking and cooking, including high-temperature cooking such as searing and browning. ♣

— Heidi Reichenberger McIndoo, MS, RD, LDN



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