

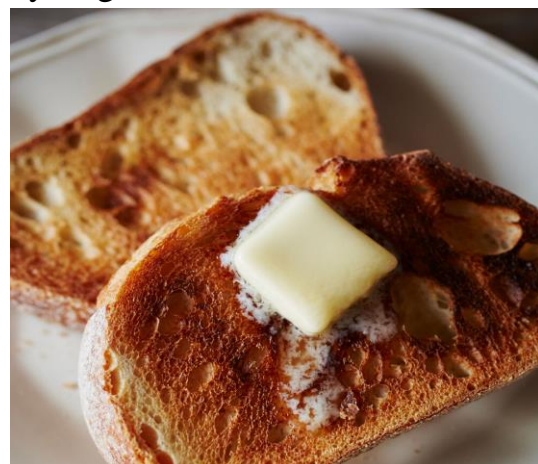
Butter, Margarine, and Plant Butter: What's the Difference?

Years ago, consumers only had two choices in the dairy aisle when came to the spread for their morning toast: butter or margarine. When determining which is the best choice, there has been some debate in recent years about which spread is indeed healthier. To add to the confusion, there is now a new option called “plant butter”. So, what is the difference between these spreads and is one healthier than the others?



Butter is a traditional dietary staple made by churning cream. It is a concentrated source of milk fat which is mostly composed of saturated fat. Because studies associated a high intake of saturated fat with an increased risk of heart disease, butter fell out of favor and margarine was thought to be the better choice.

Margarine is designed to taste and look like butter, without the saturated fat. Made from vegetable oils which contain unsaturated fats it was recommended as a heart healthy alternative. Since vegetable oils are liquid at room temperature, a process called hydrogenation was used to make them solid like butter. This process changed the chemical structure of the oil creating a type of fat, called trans fat. Trans fats are known as partially hydrogenated oil and has been shown to have unhealthy effects on cholesterol levels. For this reason, partially hydrogenated oil can no longer be added to foods in the United States. As a result, food producers are using a new technology called interesterification which replaces some of the unsaturated fats with saturated fat. Interesterification achieves similar results to hydrogenation but contain no trans fats.



“Plant butter” is the newest addition to the buttery spread alternatives. Plant butter is a nondairy butter substitute that’s typically made from a mixture of plant derived oil, such as olive, avocado, coconut, and palm kernel oil.

The main difference between margarine and plant butter is that while margarine may still contain small amounts of dairy, plant butters are free of any animal products. Although plant butter is typically 100% vegan, it can contain saturated fats due to the use of coconut and palm oils.

How do you know which spread is healthy for your heart? The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends limiting saturated fats to less than 10% of calories per day. If you normally eat 2000 calories a day, no more than 200 calories should come from saturated fat, or about 22 grams. In addition to limiting saturated fats, you should avoid trans fats altogether.

You can quickly compare the health value of spreads by looking at the nutrition labels on these products. The goal is to limit trans fat to 0 grams and saturated fat to no more than 2 grams per serving.



The following tips will help you navigate your choices in the butter section:

Bypass butter. Just a tablespoon of butter has 7 grams of saturated fat. Some “European style” butters have up to 8 grams.

Choose a tub over a stick. Sticks are often made with more of the saturated fat rich oils, like palm and palm kernel, that keep them solid.



Want real butter? Choose a whipped butter. The added air means less butter which translates into 3 ½ - 5 grams of saturated fat per tablespoon. So do tubs of “butter with” a heart healthy oil like canola, olive, or avocado oil, which reduces the amount of saturated fat per serving.

Would you like to work with a Dietitian?

To schedule an appointment, please obtain a referral for Medical Nutrition Therapy and call:
412-692-4497 (Oakland) OR 412-623-2421 (Shadyside)