

Is margarine really better than butter? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Why is margarine better than butter when margarine is just oil that is hydrogenated, which means that extra hydrogen atoms are added to oil (liquid) to make it firm? If oil is hydrogenated into butter, there would be no difference between butter and margarine because they would both be saturated fats with single bonds and the same number of hydrogen atoms. Is margarine really better than butter?

— Baffled over butter

Answer

Dear Baffled Over Butter,

You may be baffled over butter, but it sounds like you've got a good grip on chemistry! Some of the margarines sold in stores today are still made from oil that has been infused with hydrogen atoms, firming it up into a semi-hard or solid form at room temperature. This process is known as hydrogenation, and it allows the margarine to contain less saturated fat than butter.

Unfortunately, hydrogenation also forms something known as *trans* fat, which actually does more damage to your body than saturated fat. (Both butter and margarine end up containing the same amount of total fat.)

Margarines made from hydrogenated oil usually appear in a solid stick form, similar to how butter is sold. Other kinds of margarines on the market today are made from non-hydrogenated oil, making them softer in texture and lower in calories, saturated fat, trans fat, and total fat. These soft margarines, which are commonly packaged in tubs and known as "soft-tub margarines," replace the hydrogenation process with small amounts of modified palm kernel and palm oil in order to make it softer and easier to spread.

Unlike margarine, butter isn't made from vegetable oil. Instead, butter is prepared from cream, contains saturated fat, and, because it's made from an animal source, also has cholesterol. Both saturated fat and cholesterol raise unhealthy cholesterol or LDL (low-density lipoprotein). Margarine is manufactured from vegetable oils, such as corn, soybean, or safflower oil, among others. Since margarine is based on plant sources, it doesn't contain cholesterol.

Because margarines don't contain cholesterol and are now made without trans fat, the [American Heart Association](#) [2] recommends that soft margarine can be used instead of butter in recipes. Choose a margarine that contains less than two grams of saturated fat per tablespoon, no trans fat, and has liquid vegetable oil as the first ingredient.

If all this chat about fat has made you curious (or confused), check out [Good vs. bad fats](#) [3] and ["Good" and "bad" cholesterol](#) [4] in *Alice!*'s archives for more information.

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- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/margarine-really-better-butter>
- [2] <http://www.heart.org/>
- [3] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/good-vs-bad-fats-0>
- [4] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/good-and-bad-cholesterol-0>
- [5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/nutrition-physical-activity>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/optimal-nutrition>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/healthy-eating>
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- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/do-you-have-any-information-cholesterol>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/difference-between-olive-oil-and-corn-oil-0>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/facts-about-fats>
- [13] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/cholesterol-screening-test>