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Why Nutritionists Now Recommend Mixing Up Your Cooking Oils

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India's national dietary guidelines ask people to choose a variety of oils instead of depending on just one for every meal



Ask ten families which oil is the healthiest and you will get ten different answers. It is a debate that plays out in kitchens, at dinner tables, in family group chats and in neighbourhood conversations across the country. Everyone has an opinion, usually inherited from a parent or grandparent, and most of us cook with the oil we grew up with. Habit is powerful in the kitchen, and it is often the main reason one oil ends up carrying every meal. The real answer is that no single oil does it all. The smarter way to cook is to use a mix of oils through the week, and the government is now giving Indian households the same advice.

This is a useful shift in thinking. For many years, the conversation about cooking oil was framed as a contest, with one oil crowned the winner and the rest pushed aside. Families switched from one oil to another whenever a new claim made the rounds, hoping to find the single perfect answer. The more balanced view is that the question itself needs to change. Instead of asking which oil is best, it makes more sense to ask how different oils can work together in the same kitchen.

India's national dietary guidelines ask people to choose a variety of oils instead of depending on just one for every meal. [1] The reason is easy to understand. Every oil is made up of different kinds of fat, and no oil has all the good ones. Using the same oil year after year can leave the balance tilted one way, while rotating oils gives the body a wider and better mix.[2] Think of it the way you think about the rest of your plate. Nobody would suggest eating only one vegetable or one grain for

every meal, because a varied plate is understood to be a healthier plate. The same simple logic applies to the oil that goes into the pan. Variety is not a complicated idea, and it fits easily into the way Indian families already cook and eat.

The good news is that your kitchen already has the variety. Palm oil, groundnut, sesame and sunflower oil are all everyday choices in Indian homes. Many families already keep more than one bottle or tin on the shelf, perhaps one for daily cooking and another for special dishes or festive meals. That habit is the perfect starting point. You do not have to buy anything unusual or learn a new way of cooking. You only have to use what is already there with a little more thought. Palm oil is in fact the most widely used of them all, making up over 37% of the edible oil used in India, or a little more than 1 in every 3 spoons. Soybean follows at 20%, mustard at 14% and sunflower at 13%.[3]These figures show how varied the edible oil basket in Indian kitchens already is, with several oils sharing a place in everyday cooking.

This also tells us something about how Indian households actually cook. The country has a rich food culture, and each region has its own favourite oils and its own traditions. What is common in one part of the country may be rare in another, and that is exactly what makes Indian cooking so varied. The idea of mixing oils does not ask anyone to give up those traditions. It simply invites people to widen their choices a little, and to appreciate what each oil brings to the table.

Each oil brings something different to the plate. The national guidelines describe palm oil, groundnut oil, sesame oil and olive oil as rich in monounsaturated fats, the kind of fat that is considered kind to the heart,[4] The same report points out that palm oil, like every oil made from plants, contains no cholesterol, which is found only in foods from animals such as milk, meat and prawns[5]. Sunflower oil is one of the richest sources of polyunsaturated fats among commonly used oils. [6]Put simply, when you mix oils, you collect the strengths of each one.

It helps to see this as a team effort. In a good team, no single player has to do everything, because each member contributes what they do best. Oils work in much the same way. One may be valued for its fats, another for its taste, and another for how it behaves in a hot pan. When they are used together over days and weeks, the kitchen gets the benefit of all of them, and no single oil has to be asked to do a job it is not suited for. That is the heart of the guidance on mixing oils, and it is a message that is easy to understand and easy to follow.

Feeling confident about what goes into your pan matters too. Cooking is an act of care, and most people who prepare food for their families want to be sure that what they use is safe and trustworthy. India has a legal limit of 2% on trans-fat, the unhealthy kind of fat, in fats and oils.[7] Food safety rules, labels and testing are overseen by the national food regulator, FSSAI, and its Eat Right India movement keeps the focus on safe and healthy food. [8]This system of rules and checks gives households a solid base to build on. When you know that standards exist and that they are looked after by a national regulator, it becomes easier to focus on the more enjoyable part of the decision, which is choosing which oils to bring into your kitchen and how to use them well.

Mixing oils also does not have to be complicated. You do not need to change your oil every week. The guidelines note that how well an oil handles heat matters more than switching often,[9] That is why the real skill is matching the right oil to the right dish. Some dishes are cooked gently, some are cooked quickly on a high flame, and some are fried in plenty of oil. Different cooking methods ask different things of the oil in the pan, and thinking about this before you cook is a simple way to make better choices without any extra effort.

So how do you put this into practice? A simple way is to match the oil to the way you cook. Groundnut or sesame oil works well for everyday vegetables and tempering. For puris, pakoras and other deep-fried favourites, palm oil is a popular choice because it stays steady at high heat. Keep mustard oil for the dishes where its taste is the star. If you are not sure where to begin, change the oil you use each month, and you will quickly build the habit of cooking with variety.

Starting with a monthly change is a gentle and practical way to begin. It does not ask for a big decision or a major change to the household routine. You simply pick a different oil when the next bottle is due, and you notice how it suits the dishes you make. Over a few months, you will begin to see which oils you prefer for which meals, and the habit will start to feel natural. Over time, this simple rotation brings several oils into regular use without requiring any major change in how a household buys or cooks, which keeps everyday practice in line with the guidance.

The takeaway is easy to remember. No single oil should carry the whole kitchen, and a mix of oils helps you get more from every meal. The more you understand each oil, the more confidently you can choose.

Seen in this light, the guidance on cooking oils is less about giving something up and more about making full use of what is already available. India's kitchens draw on a wide range of oils, each with its own fat profile, its own taste and its own behaviour under heat, and the national guidelines simply encourage households to make use of that range. With a clear

limit on trans-fat and a national regulator overseeing food safety, households can make these choices with greater assurance. The principle at work here is balance. No oil is asked to do everything, no single choice is treated as a cure-all, and each oil is used where it performs best. This is the thread that runs through the national guidelines, and it is why variety has become the central message on cooking oils. Informed choices at the household level, supported by clear standards, are what turn guidance on paper into better everyday practice. The way forward is a balanced oil basket, chosen with an understanding of what each oil offers and used with a clear sense of what each dish needs. It is a practical, well-founded approach to everyday cooking, and one that can serve Indian households well for years to come.

[1] ICMR-NIN Dietary Guidelines for Indians 2024

[2] The great Indian oil debate: Coconut, sunflower, mustard or olive?

[3] Every Indian now consumes 24 kg edible oil a year, triple the 2001 level

[4] Palm Oil’s nutritional value recognized in ICMR-NIN’s 2024 dietary guidelines

[5] Palm Oil’s nutritional value recognized in ICMR-NIN’s 2024 dietary guidelines

[6] The great Indian oil debate: Coconut, sunflower, mustard or olive?

[7] India's first Edible Oil Survey

[8] Eat Right India: Safe, Healthy and Sustainable Food for All

[9] indian-dietary-guidelines