

Essential oil

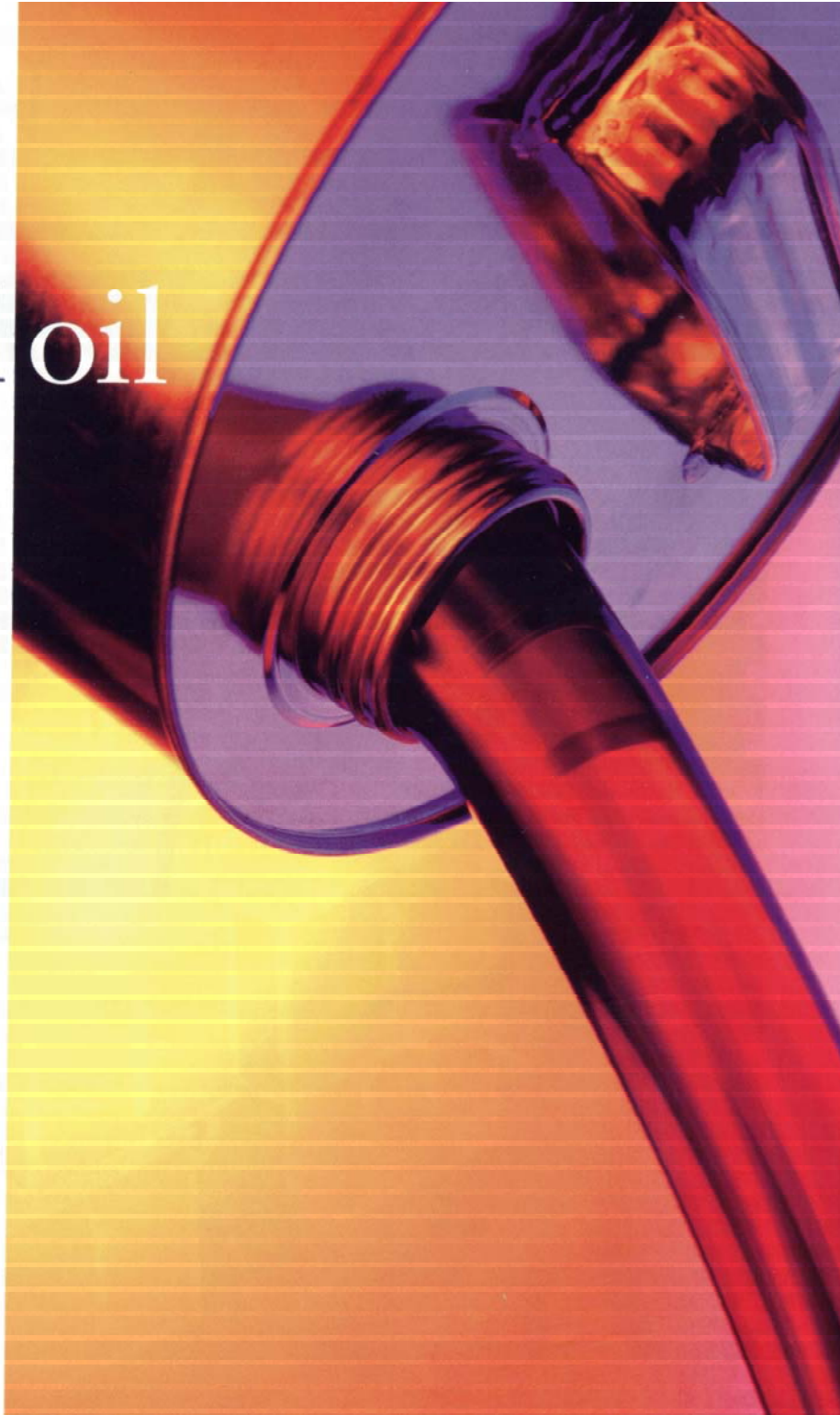
IT NOURISHES, LUBRICATES AND PROTECTS US – BUT IS YOUR BODY GETTING ENOUGH?

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Many people believe that oil, like fat, is best avoided. But some oils have valuable health benefits and should be regularly consumed.

Oils come from plant, animal and fish sources and are a mixture of saturated, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. Saturated fats are best avoided or eaten in moderation, as they can raise the level of 'bad' cholesterol, called lower density lipoprotein (LDL), which is linked to deposits in the arteries and raises the risk of coronary heart disease. Mostly they originate from animal fats, although plant sources include coconut oil, and they're found in foods such as butter, lard, whole milk, cream and suet.

Both polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats are much better for us. The best form is polyunsaturated, which can help lower LDL cholesterol, and there are two types – omega-6 and omega-3. Omega-6 fatty acids are mainly found in vegetable oils and seeds, such as sunflower, sesame, safflower and soya oil. The main source of



omega-3 is oily fish, although it's also found to a lesser extent in flax or linseed oil.

Monounsaturated fats also help to lower LDL levels in the blood and may help maintain levels of high-density lipoproteins (HDL), or 'good cholesterol', in the body. Good sources of monounsaturates include olive oil, rapeseed oil and nuts.

According to the Food Standards Agency, we should include both polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats in our diet, but 'fat should account for no more than one third of a healthy balanced diet for everyone over the age of two'. This is equivalent to approximately '76g a day for women and 100g a day for men'.

RUNNING SMOOTHLY

As well as being a necessary component in our diet, certain oils can help our skin, joints, eyes, heart and mental health, too. What's more, they're beneficial for all ages – from babies and children to younger adults and the older generation.

Fish oils, such as cod liver oil, improve joint mobility and arthritis, skin complaints such as eczema and psoriasis, aid depression and offer benefits to the eyes and brain. They're also believed to be beneficial for the immune system, helping the body fight colds. Evening primrose oil is often used to treat the symptoms of hormonal conditions such as

premenstrual syndrome and, like fish oils, it can help arthritis and inflammatory conditions.

Olive oil is strongly associated with a reduced risk of heart disease and, in countries such as Italy where it is widely consumed, people have significantly lower cases of heart problems. In fact, Dr Hannah Theobald, a nutrition scientist at the British Nutrition Foundation, says that diets rich in olive oil 'are well known as being associated with lower rates of chronic diseases, such as heart disease and some forms of cancer'.

UP YOUR INTAKE

Easy ways of adding nuts and seeds to your diet are in salads, yogurt, cereals, smoothie drinks or stir fries. The Food Standards Agency recommends eating 'two portions of fish a week, including one portion of oily fish, such as mackerel or sardines'.

Although in the first instance it's useful to try and eat or cook with oils, says the British Dietetic Association, if you're not able to or need extra nutrients, then taking supplements is an accessible alternative. The Health Supplements Information Service suggests a daily spoonful or capsule of cod liver oil, or evening primrose oil, should be sufficient, but if you're in any doubt, consult a health practitioner.

Whatever your age or state of health, oils have lots to offer, so take advantage and reap the benefits!

LET IT POUR

OLIVE OIL – a monounsaturated oil, it can be used in cooking and salad dressings or you can add herbs to make a flavoured infusion. Extra virgin olive oil is higher quality, with a deeper colour and stronger flavour.

CORN OIL – made from the pressed kernels of corn, it's mostly polyunsaturated and contains vitamin E. Good in salad dressings.

SUNFLOWER OIL – high in polyunsaturated fat and rich in vitamin E, it's good for cooking.

SESAME OIL – usually a mixture of mono- and polyunsaturated fats, this adds a nutty flavour to stir-fry dishes.

SOYA OIL – it has little taste, so 15ml of this pale coloured oil obtained from soya beans can be added to smoothie drinks.

FLAXSEED OIL – obtained from linseeds, it's a good alternative to fish oils for vegetarians and can be taken directly (15ml spoonful) or added to yogurt.