

The spread on your bread

Confused about what to put on your toast? Here's the nutritional lowdown on butter and margarine

Life used to be simple. You spread butter on your bread, melted it over vegetables and used it in cooking. Then new research discovered that saturated fat raises our cholesterol and increases our risk of heart disease.

More than 65 per cent of the fat in butter is saturated. Very quickly butter topped the “bad food” list.

Margarine, originally produced as a cheap spread, was suddenly promoted as the healthy choice and sales took off. Then scientists discovered the chemical process used to turn an oil into a spread created a type of fat called trans fat that was even worse than saturated fat.

Margarine was invented by a Frenchman in 1870, although it only became popular during and after the war years. Today, margarine sales far outweigh butter sales, largely because of the perceived health benefits. But can a modern manufactured product really be healthier than the fat made from churning wholesome cow's milk?

As a passionate believer in eating “real” food as much as possible, I struggle with the idea that we can manufacture something that is better for us than a relatively simple food consumed for thousands of years. But I'll give you the facts and you can make up your own mind.

The saturated fat in butter is not good for us as it tends to raise “bad” LDL cholesterol in blood, increasing our risk of heart disease. Plus, manufacturers of margarines responded quickly to the information on trans fats and produced a



Butter or margarine? How about neither? Try olive oil on bread and mashed avocado in sandwiches.

new generation of margarines with little or no trans fats.

Because of the oils used to make margarine such as canola, sunflower, olive and soy it's generally high in healthy mono and polyunsaturated fats, which have the ability to lower LDL cholesterol. In fact, a US study of 46 families published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that substituting margarine for butter lowered blood cholesterol levels.

Plant sterol margarines, which bind cholesterol in the gut, preventing it from being re-absorbed, take it a step further. Studies have shown that these margarines can be effective in lowering cholesterol.

There's no doubt that if you have pre-existing high cholesterol levels, a plant sterol margarine can help, possibly reducing the need for cholesterol-lowering drugs. The only catch is you have to make sure you use enough of it — a fairly generous spread on 3-4 slices of bread — and it's more expensive.

Butter lovers can take heart from the fact that butter contains several essential nutrients — in particular, the fat-soluble vitamins A, D and E. In our obsession with reducing fat, we were actually neglecting these nutrients, though margarines are now fortified with them.

So what will it be — butter or margarine? I'm going to play devil's advocate and suggest neither. Butter is clearly not the best sort of fat for heart health. Margarine is a modern invention and not a part of traditional diets around the world. An olive oil margarine is not the same as a Mediterranean-style, olive oil-based diet, and an omega-3 enriched margarine is not the same as a diet high in fish and seafood.

Try brushing your bread with olive oil, use a nut spread on toast, spread mashed avocado in sandwiches and cook with olive or other healthy oils. It's simple, really. ■

— JOANNA McMILLAN PRICE