



Cooking oils and cancer: What Indians should be concerned about

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A recent research published in *Gut* has suggested a potential connection between specific cooking oils and colon cancer among the young. *Gut* is a journal of the British Society for Gastroenterology and the British Medical Journal.

The rise of colon and rectal cancer in individuals below the age of 50 is a striking new trend. Given the use of oil in Indian cooking, the study might offer some insights into potential risks for us too.

Dr. Mohammed Mithi, consultant oncologist from the Saifee Hospital, Mumbai, however, warned that the study was not large or robust enough for its conclusions to be generalised. It was, however, worth examining.

The study points to processed vegetable oils, such as soybean, sunflower, and palm oils, as potential culprits. These oils are high in omega-6 fatty acids, which, while essential in small amounts, can lead to chronic inflammation if consumed excessively. Such inflammation enhances risk for many diseases, including cancer.

The refining process to make cooking oils also removes beneficial nutrients from them while adding unhealthy trans fats. This is especially true for refined oils which are heavily used in Indian kitchens due to low cost and high smoke points (the temperature at which the oil starts to burn).

The use of such oils is compounded by deep frying which is common in our kitchens. Heating oils at high temperatures, particularly repeatedly, can produce harmful compounds like acrylamide and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, both of which have been linked to cancer risk.

There is however not just a straight relationship between these oils and cancer risks as overall diet, genetics, and lifestyle also have a role to play.

Another serious point of concern in Indian diets is the insufficient consumption of fibre which aid in digestion, allowing regular elimination of harmful residues or poisons from one's system.

Saifee offers some pointers to minimise potential risks. The first is to use unrefined or cold-pressed oils like mustard oil, groundnut oil, or coconut oil. They have more nutrients and fewer chemicals compared to refined oils. Olive oil, especially extra virgin, is another good choice, but is better suited for low-heat cooking. Secondly, rotate your oils to get the right mix of fatty acids.

Source: <https://www.theweek.in/news/health/2024/12/26/cooking-oils-and-cancer-what-indians-should-be-concerned-about.html>