**What Are "Oils"?**

Oils are fats that are liquid at room temperature, like the vegetable oils used in cooking. Oils come from many different plants and from fish. Oils are NOT a food group, but they provide essential nutrients. Therefore, oils are included in USDA food patterns.  
  
Some commonly eaten oils include:

* canola oil
* corn oil
* cottonseed oil
* olive oil
* safflower oil
* soybean oil
* sunflower oil

Some oils are used mainly as flavorings, such as walnut oil and sesame oil. A number of foods are naturally high in oils, like:

* nuts
* olives
* some fish
* avocados

Foods that are mainly oil include mayonnaise, certain salad dressings, and soft (tub or squeeze) margarine with no *trans* fats. Check the [Nutrition Facts label](http://www.fda.gov/Food/LabelingNutrition/ConsumerInformation/ucm078889.htm) to find margarines with 0 grams of *trans* fat. Amounts of *trans* fat are required to be listed on labels.

Most oils are high in monounsaturated or polyunsaturated fats, and low in saturated fats. Oils from plant sources (vegetable and nut oils) do not contain any cholesterol. In fact, no plant foods contain cholesterol.

A few plant oils, however, including coconut oil, palm oil, and palm kernel oil, are high in saturated fats and for nutritional purposes should be considered to be [solid fats](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/weight-management-calories/calories/solid-fats.html).

Solid fats are fats that are solid at room temperature, like butter and shortening. Solid fats come from many animal foods and can be made from vegetable oils through a process called hydrogenation. Some common fats are:

* butter
* milk fat
* beef fat (tallow, suet)
* chicken fat
* pork fat (lard)
* stick margarine
* shortening
* partially hydrogenated oil

# How Are Oils Different from Solid Fats?

All fats and oils are a mixture of saturated fatty acids and unsaturated fatty acids. Solid fats contain more **saturated fats** and/or **trans fats** than oils. Oils contain more monounsaturated (MUFA) and polyunsaturated (PUFA) fats. Saturated fats, trans fats, and cholesterol tend to raise “bad” (LDL) cholesterol levels in the blood, which in turn increases the risk for heart disease. To lower risk for heart disease, cut back on foods containing saturated fats, trans fats, and cholesterol.

# Why Is it Important to Consume Oils?

Oils are not a food group, but they do provide essential nutrients and are therefore included in USDA recommendations for what to eat. Note that only small amounts of oils are recommended.

Most of the fats you eat should be polyunsaturated (PUFA) or monounsaturated (MUFA) fats. Oils are the major source of MUFAs and PUFAs in the diet. PUFAs contain some fatty acids that are necessary for health—called "essential fatty acids."

Because oils contain these essential fatty acids, there is an allowance for oils in the food guide.

The MUFAs and PUFAs found in fish, nuts, and vegetable oils do not raise LDL ("bad") cholesterol levels in the blood. In addition to the essential fatty acids they contain, oils are the major source of vitamin E in typical American diets.

While consuming some oil is needed for health, oils still contain calories. In fact, oils and solid fats both contain about 120 calories per tablespoon. Therefore, the amount of oil consumed needs to be limited to balance total calorie intake. The [Nutrition Facts label](http://www.fda.gov/Food/LabelingNutrition/ConsumerInformation/ucm078889.htm) provides information to help you make smart choices.

**How much is my allowance for oils?**  
Divider  
Some Americans consume enough oil in the foods they eat, such as:

* nuts
* fish
* cooking oil
* salad dressings

Others could easily consume the recommended allowance by substituting oils for some solid fats they eat. A person’s allowance for oils depends on age, sex, and level of physical activity. Daily allowances are shown in the chart.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Daily allowance\*** | | | | |
| **Children** |  | 2-3 years old |  | 3 teaspoons |
|  |  | 4-8 years old |  | 4 teaspoons |
|  | | | | |
| **Girls** |  | 9-13 years old |  | 5 teaspoons |
|  |  | 14-18 years old |  | 5 teaspoons |
|  | | | | |
| **Boys** |  | 9-13 years old |  | 5 teaspoons |
|  |  | 14-18 years old |  | 6 teaspoons |
|  | | | | |
| **Women** |  | 19-30 years old |  | 6 teaspoons |
|  |  | 31-50 years old |  | 5 teaspoons |
|  |  | 51+ years old |  | 5 teaspoons |
|  | | | | |
| **Men** |  | 19-30 years old |  | 7 teaspoons |
|  |  | 31-50 years old |  | 6 teaspoons |
|  |  | 51+ years old |  | 6 teaspoons |

\*These amounts are appropriate for individuals who get less than 30 minutes per day of moderate physical activity, beyond normal daily activities. Those who are more physically active may be able to consume more while staying within calorie needs.

**How do I count the oils I eat?**  
Divider  
The chart gives a quick guide to the amount of oils in some common foods:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **Amount of food** | | **Amount of oil** | | **Calories from oil** | | **Total calories** | |
|  |  |  |  | Teaspoons  /grams |  | Approximate  calories |  | Approximate  calories |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| **Oils:** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Vegetable oils (such as canola, corn, cottonseed, olive, peanut, safflower, soybean, and sunflower) |  | 1 Tbsp |  | 3 tsp/14 g |  | 120 |  | 120 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| **Foods rich in oils:** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Margarine, soft (*trans* fat free) |  | 1 Tbsp |  | 2 ½ tsp/11 g |  | 100 |  | 100 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Mayonnaise |  | 1 Tbsp |  | 2 ½ tsp/11 g |  | 100 |  | 100 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Mayonnaise-type salad dressing |  | 1 Tbsp |  | 1 tsp/5 g |  | 45 |  | 55 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Italian dressing |  | 2 Tbsp |  | 2 tsp/8 g |  | 75 |  | 85 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Thousand Island dressing |  | 2 Tbsp |  | 2 ½ tsp/11 g |  | 100 |  | 120 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Olives\*, ripe, canned |  | 4 large |  | ½ tsp/ 2 g |  | 15 |  | 20 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Avocado\* |  | ½ med |  | 3 tsp/15 g |  | 130 |  | 160 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Peanut butter\* |  | 2 T |  | 4 tsp/ 16 g |  | 140 |  | 190 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Peanuts, dry roasted\* |  | 1 oz |  | 3 tsp/14 g |  | 120 |  | 165 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Mixed nuts, dry roasted\* |  | 1 oz |  | 3 tsp/15 g |  | 130 |  | 170 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Cashews, dry roasted\* |  | 1 oz |  | 3 tsp/13 g |  | 115 |  | 165 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Almonds, dry roasted\* |  | 1 oz |  | 3 tsp/15 g |  | 130 |  | 170 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Hazelnuts\* |  | 1 oz |  | 4 tsp/18 g |  | 160 |  | 185 |  |
|  | | | | | | | | |  |
| Sunflower seeds\* |  | 1 oz |  | 3 tsp/14 g |  | 120 |  | 165 |  |

\*Avocados and olives are part of the Vegetable Group; nuts and seeds are part of the Protein   
Foods Group. These foods are also high in oils. Soft margarine, mayonnaise, and salad   
dressings are mainly oil and are not considered to be part of any food group.