

The Organic Consultancy Talking About... Palm Oil

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History

Palm oil is produced from the fruit of the oil palm *Elaeis Guinnesis* which is found in Africa, South East Asia and Latin America. Although humans have eaten the oil palm for over 5000 years commercial planting and cultivation did not begin until the mid-1990's in Malaysia.

Production and Uses

Palm oil is extracted and refined through pressing and crushing rather than through using chemical solvents such as hexane. Palm oil can be further refined into palm olein (liquid) and palm stearine (solid). Palm olein is used as a frying oil because it is very stable to heat, whilst palm stearine is used in biscuits and cakes and in non-hydrogenated margarine. Palm stearine is also used to stop peanut butter from separating. Palm oil resists oxidation and rancidity, which means products made using palm oil have extended shelf lives.

Organic palm oil

The fact that palm oil is solid at room temperature, has a neutral taste and can be extracted without the use of solvents has made organic palm oil a very useful ingredient in organic food processing. The only other organic fats which are solid at room temperature are butter and coconut oil, both of which are highly saturated.

But I thought palm oil was highly saturated?

Palm oil is frequently confused with palm kernel oil, which is highly saturated. In contrast palm oil contains a balance of polyunsaturated, monounsaturated and saturated fatty acids. In addition palm oil contains essential substances such as linoleic acid (an essential fatty acid which the body cannot manufacture) and tocopherols and tocotrienols, which act as natural anti-oxidants against damaging free-radicals.

What about cholesterol?

Like other vegetable fats palm oil is free from cholesterol. Because palm oil is solid at room temperature there is no need to use hydrogenation, a technique which hardens liquid oil but also produces damaging trans fatty acids and raises cholesterol levels in the process. Human feeding studies have shown that palm oil does not ordinarily raise blood cholesterol levels and in some cases has been found to lower harmful LDL-cholesterol.

Any other health benefits?

Rats fed on a palm-oil enriched diet had a reduced tendency to form blood clots. Unrefined palm olein (which is bright red in colour) is a major source of carotenoids which inhibit some

types of cancer. The unrefined oil is also a major source of beta-carotene, which is a precursor to Vitamin A.

So why does palm oil have such a bad reputation?

In the 1980's the American Soya Oil processors were worried about losing domestic sales to imports of palm oil from Malaysia. They set up organisations with names like American Heartsavers which purported to promote good health to consumers but in reality these organisations were a front for attacking "tropical" oils such as palm oil. The campaign culminated in full page newspaper advertisements carrying headlines such as "Stop The Poisoning Of America". Some of this misinformation trickled across the Atlantic and has left residual doubts in the minds of UK consumers and industry figures even today.

Where can I find out more?

www.mpopc.org.my

Other resources:

www.ciranda.com (the supplier of Simple Food's palm stearin ingredient)

Simple Soynut Butter

<http://www.simplefood.com>