Butter vs. Margarine

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The debate between butter and margarine seems to be one that will go on for eternity and one that doesn't ever have clear answers. There are arguments against both sides-"margarine is one molecule away from plastic" and "butter is full of bad fats." I'm going to dig into what the science tells us about both butter and margarine and how to determine which option is best for your health

Let's start with butter. Butter is made from churned dairy milk or cream and contains animal fat mostly in the form of saturated fat. Saturated fat can raise LDL (bad) blood cholesterol and increase your risk for heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends limiting saturated fat to 5-6% of your total calories. This would be about 120 calories, or about 2 tablespoons of butter, for a 2,000 calorie diet.

Margarine was invented in 1869 in France as a less expensive alternative to butter. It is made from vegetable oils so the primary fat is unsaturated fat which decreases your risk for heart disease, stroke, and reduces bad blood cholesterol. Some margarines contain trans fats which have a similar risk to our health as saturated fats. The American Heart Association recommends limited trans fats as much as possible and replacing saturated and trans fats with unsaturated fats.

So, we have butter that contains mostly unhealthy fats and margarine that is mostly healthy fats with a mix of unhealthy fats depending on the margarine you choose. What about butter being a more natural food and the claims of margarine being one step away from plastic? If you've ever churned your own butter in a jar with marbles, then you know it can take minimal steps to make butter. Margarine is a little more complicated but that doesn't mean it's harmful as many claim.

Plastic and margarine are both made of the same molecules with some slight differences. Remember that literally everything is made up of molecules so there are many things that have a similar chemical structure but that doesn't mean they are even remotely the same. The exact placement of each molecule is what's important and determines what that thing is and if it is safe or not. The addition or subtraction of one molecule, or where it is placed, makes the biggest of differences. For example, I don't think anyone soon will be making the claim that hydrogen peroxide, which is only 1 molecule different from water, is as safe and drinkable as water. "One molecule different" does not equal "the same as" when discussing chemical structures.

Will you be reaching for butter or margarine the next time you hit the grocery store? Here's how to decide. I always want to talk about the reason we even use a spread in the first place and that is usually to add taste to something. So firstly, think about what the one you actually like to eat. Have a strong preference? Then you have your answer. Impartial to both? Then let's talk health. A tub margarine, especially one made with canola or olive oil, can promote heart health with boosting up the healthy fats and reduce saturated fats. Compare labels for the least amount of saturated and trans fats and the most (poly and mono) unsaturated fats. No matter what spread you choose, always be mindful of how much you're using. Even the "heart healthy" margarines are a rich source of calories in a small serving.