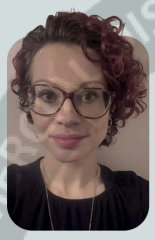
- Oils and fats



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Seed oils have come under fire recently, particularly on social media, with claims that they're 'toxic' and increase inflammation in our bodies. But does the evidence support these statements? Emily Angus separates fact from fiction

Weighing up the facts on...



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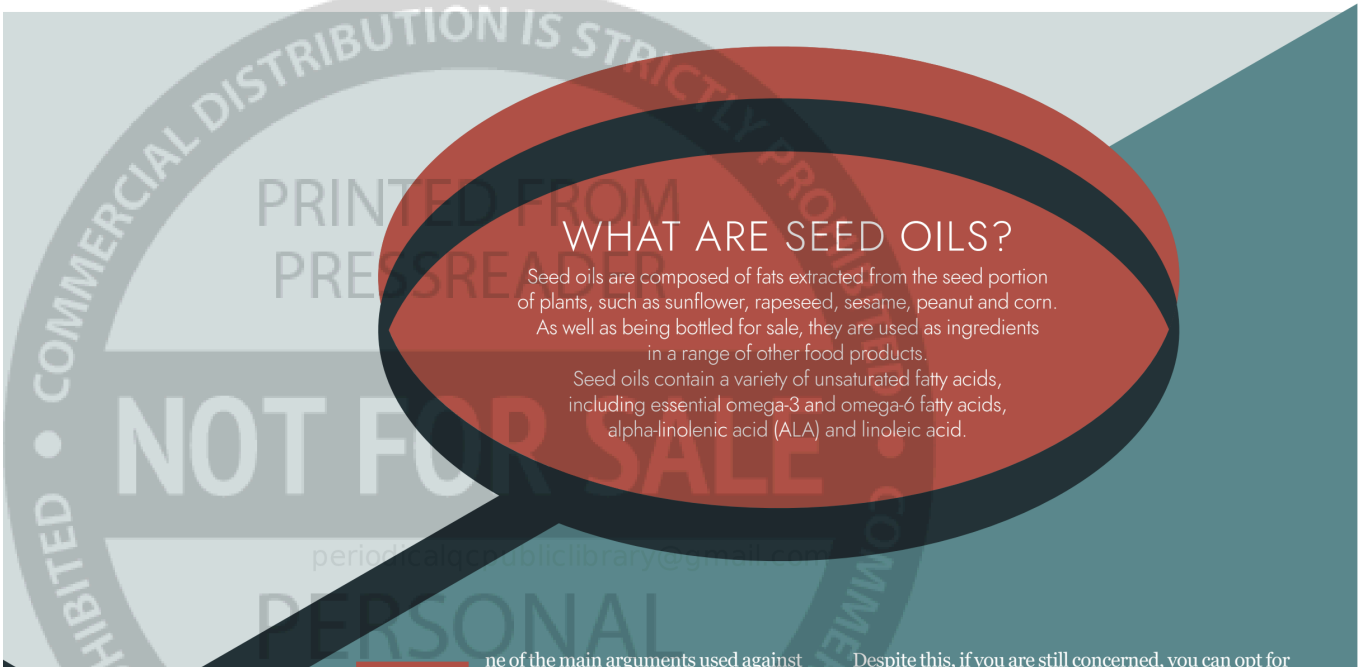

WHAT ARE SEED OILS?

Seed oils are composed of fats extracted from the seed portion of plants, such as sunflower, rapeseed, sesame, peanut and corn. As well as being bottled for sale, they are used as ingredients in a range of other food products.
Seed oils contain a variety of unsaturated fatty acids, including essential omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, alpha-linolenic acid (ALA) and linoleic acid.

One of the main arguments used against seed oils is that they are 'pro-inflammatory' because they contain omega-6 fatty acids, and that consuming them leads to an increased risk of developing long-term health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer.

It is true that the omega-6 fatty acid linoleic acid can be converted to arachidonic acid in our bodies, which helps to regulate inflammation, pain and blood clotting. However, this is one of the many roles linoleic acid plays in our bodies, and the rate of conversion is only around 0.3 per cent. Our bodies also need some inflammatory molecules in order to respond appropriately to infections and injury.

There is currently no evidence to support the claim that people with higher intakes of linoleic acid have higher levels of inflammatory compounds in their bodies. In fact, studies show that people with higher omega-6 intake have lower levels of inflammation and are less likely to develop cardiovascular disease or type 2 diabetes.

Many people who take a stance against seed oils argue that we should be consuming animal fats such as butter instead, but evidence consistently shows that eating animal fats, which are high in saturated fatty acids, can increase cholesterol levels and cardiovascular disease risk.

Toxin production

The word 'toxic' has become a health buzzword, and seed oils are one of the latest targets. One concern raised is the use of hexane for heat extraction of the oil. In reality, hexane is removed after the extraction process. While trace amounts may remain in the final product, these are present in very low levels and nowhere near the quantities that have been shown to cause toxic effects.

Another argument is that heating seed oils can produce other toxins, such as acrylamide. While this is technically possible, this only happens when oils are heated to temperatures above their smoke point for a prolonged period. As seed oils have smoke points above 250°C, it is not possible to achieve this when cooking at home.

Despite this, if you are still concerned, you can opt for cold-pressed oils which don't use heat or hexane during production.

Are they UPF?

Seed oils have also received criticism for being processed foods. However, they are not classified as ultra-processed and sit in NOVA Group 2, also known as 'processed culinary ingredients' alongside foods such as sugar, salt, vinegar and other oils.

Either way, the level of processing a food undergoes is not reliably linked to its healthfulness, with the nutrient profile (fibre, saturated fat, sugar and salt content) considered more important.

What about Omega-3?

Omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids are considered essential fatty acids because our bodies cannot produce them, and they are both important for our health. Whilst omega-3s have a stronger anti-inflammatory effect, omega-6s are still anti-inflammatory and play a positive role in metabolic health.

Concerns have been raised that the increased amount of omega-6 fatty acids in our modern diets could be cancelling out the protective effect of the omega-3 fatty acids we eat. While these fatty acids are similar in structure, which means they compete to bind to receptors in our bodies, the answer to this problem is not to avoid omega-6s but instead to focus on eating more omega-3 rich foods.

Seed oils often contain a mixture of both fatty acids, for example flaxseed oil which is a valuable source of omega-3, so seed oils can be a good way to increase your omega-3 intake as a vegan.

This is an example of how intensely focussing on individual nutrients is not always a helpful way to think about a balanced diet, and can lack nuance. Working on incorporating a wide range of health-promoting foods in your diet is more beneficial and less confusing.

Seed oils contain a variety of beneficial unsaturated and essential fatty acids that can help to reduce the risk of developing metabolic diseases. Adding fats to our meals also helps with the absorption of vitamins A, D, E and K, so consider incorporating them in a salad dressing or use for cooking up a tasty stir fry!

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