

Butter vs margarine

The plant-based eating movement is continuing to grow as people become more aware of both the health and environmental benefits of eating less meat and dairy.

The food industry has responded quickly by churning out a plethora of meat-free alternatives, plant milks and other innovative products designed to help people transition to plant-based eating – including margarine.

Do we need to stop giving margarine such a hard time?

Despite margarine being perfectly suited to a plant-based diet, it's often challenged based on a tarnished reputation which has been tricky to shake off.

Negative attitudes towards margarine are often based on historical hearsay, but could a better understanding have us falling back in love with plant-based spreads?

How have attitudes towards nutrition evolved?

Nutrition is a key pillar of good health, supporting all our bodily processes and helping to reduce the risk of disease. We have grown up in the presence of key public health messaging telling us to eat less saturated fat, sugar and salt while focusing on whole foods such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains and other plant-based offerings.

In the midst of all this it's always been clear that including more plant-based foods in our diet is good for our health. The benefits of eating these foods can never be questioned as they provide us with an abundance of essential nutrients shown to support all areas of health.

What are the other benefits of plant-based eating?

Modern day messaging around nutrition has evolved greatly, encompassing many of the wider issues regarding food provenance and production. Excessive use of water, greenhouse gas emissions and animal welfare are just a few of the reasons why

plant-based eating is booming.

This approach is not about going vegan. In fact, there are still relatively few vegans in the UK with a more significant number of people identifying themselves as being flexitarian with the intention of eating less meat. The message is simply about eating more plants and less animal-derived foods which has been helped along by campaigns such as meat-free Mondays and Veganuary.

Why did attitudes towards margarine change?

Margarine has been around for decades and was hugely popular during the 80s as a cheaper and healthier alternative to dairy butter. Much of the marketing and promotion was based on this fact, which helped to promote good heart health.

Beyond this, these products slowly became persona non grata as nutrition research advanced and it turned out that they may not have been so great for our heart after all.

It became more widely acknowledged that the production methods used to make margarine created trans fats. This type of saturated fat increases LDL (bad) cholesterol and lowers HDL (good) cholesterol as well

as also increasing a form of blood fats called triglycerides. The combined effect of this equates to an increased risk of coronary heart disease.

While market leading margarines removed partially hydrogenated oils many years ago, meaning they contain no trans fats, many people still view this as a reason to avoid them.

Is margarine a better alternative to dairy butter?

Dairy butter is often considered to be a more 'natural' choice, however the process to make plant-based margarine is just as natural. In fact the regulations imposed upon the margarine and spreads industry are more strict, meaning all ingredients have to be listed, while for butter this isn't the case.

In addition, the provenance of dairy butter raises many of the issues surrounding the production of animal-based food products. Producing plant-based foods such as non-dairy spreads generates lower greenhouse gas emissions and encourages more responsible use of land, fuel and fertiliser than their dairy counterparts.

Margarines contain a greater amount of heart-healthy mono and polyunsaturated fats as well as essential fats like omega-3 and omega-6 fats.

"Plant-based margarine is just as natural as butter"

Our Expert



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Separating the facts from the myths

There are many myths and misconceptions surrounding margarines and plant-based spreads, but is there any truth in them?

MYTH Margarines are highly processed

The journey from plant to spread is actually very natural with many companies pledging a commitment to environmental responsibilities. After harvesting, plants are pressed to extract the oils then water, natural enzymes and a natural filtration process is used to purify them. The oils are then blended to achieve the right texture and melting quality using natural enzymes or spinning at high speed. Oils are then cooled and churned to achieve the right consistency.

MYTH Margarines contain lots of unnatural ingredients

Basic margarines contain just four natural ingredients including water, plant oils, natural plant-based emulsifiers and salt. Certain margarines are fortified with additional ingredients to provide added health benefits. These may include plant sterols, such as Flora ProActiv which help to reduce cholesterol.

MYTH Margarines are not fully plant-based and unsuitable for vegans

It's true that margarines can contain traces of gelatine, whey and milk proteins. However, many leading brands are now ensuring that their products are fully plant-based by eliminating all traces of these ingredients.

Given our growing interest and the many benefits associated with plant-based eating it seems obvious that we should be viewing margarine as a preferred choice of spread!

