

# butter *vs* spread

## WHICH IS BEST?

Is butter better, or is it time to ditch the spreads? Dietitian Melissa Meier dips into the latest research and shares smart swaps.

**F**rom traditional butter to trending dairy-free spreads – and almost everything else in between – it can be tricky to know what's the healthiest choice. Add to that the abundance of health claims, and you've got a supermarket basketful of confusion. But if you follow *HFG*'s guide to spreads and butters, you can have your toast – and eat it, too!

### Quality and quantity count

Butter's back in fashion, with some advocates proclaiming it's healthier and more natural than margarine. But let's take a closer look. Butter – made simply from churned cream and often a touch of salt – is about 50 per cent saturated fat. Despite sensational media reports to the contrary, saturated fat does indeed raise your cholesterol levels. It raises

your LDL, or so-called 'bad' cholesterol, but it also raises your 'good' HDL cholesterol. So, what's the overall effect of all that saturated fat in butter?

That's where the rest of your diet comes in. Sure, a smear of butter on your morning toast is fine if you're eating an otherwise healthy diet. It only becomes a problem if you go overboard with butter, or if your diet is already high in other sources of saturated fat like processed snacks and fried foods. To help keep your heart healthy, you should also check the sodium content and opt for an unsalted butter variety.

**HFG tip**  
Swap butter for avocado to slash sat fat by more than 90%

### The margarine debate

Margarine is made up of oils that have been hardened but which are still spreadable.

It's usually made with olive or canola oils, so is much higher in beneficial mono- and polyunsaturated fats than butter. These healthier fats lift good HDL cholesterol and are cardio-protective. Plus, they're much lower in saturated fat than butter.

The confusion surrounding margarine has come about due to the trans-fats that were once generated by margarine's original hardening process.

These are a double-whammy: they raise bad LDL cholesterol and lower good HDL cholesterol. In Australia, however, trans fats are not an issue. Manufacturers have changed the production method, so these dangerous fats are now virtually non-existent.

However, an olive-oil spread with 16–18 per cent olive oil is just not as health-giving as good-quality extra-virgin olive oil itself, and margarine enriched with omega-3 does not confer the same benefits as a diet high in fish and seafood.

### Are butter blends better?

You might think you're buying butter, but it's likely to be a dairy blend – known as 'spreadable butter'. Spreadables are made from butter blended with vegetable oils. They often look and taste just like butter, with less saturated fat. And they're easier to spread straight from the fridge.

### What about plant-sterol spreads?

**Expensive cholesterol-lowering spreads line the shelves, but do they actually work?** These products contain plant sterols which block your body's ability to absorb cholesterol – but you have to consistently consume up to six teaspoons of plant sterol spread every day to see any benefit to your cholesterol levels. They really only benefit those who use it to replace another kind of fat, rather than people who might be adding it as additional fat to their diet.

Heart health isn't just about spreads. You can also look after your heart by eating healthy fats from fish and nuts, or fibre-rich oats and whole grains, which in our opinion, taste a whole lot better! *hfg*

## Smart spread swaps

Butter and margarine aren't your only choices. Dip into these nutritious *and* delicious options.



**Avocado**

Rich in heart-healthy fats, fibre and vitamins  
**HFG TIP** Top grainy toast with smashed avo and poached eggs.



**Nut butter**

Full of protein and fibre  
**HFG TIP** Spread no-added-salt PB on crackers or bread, and top with sliced banana.



**Extra-virgin olive oil**

Powerful antioxidants  
**HFG TIP** Drizzle Australian EVOO over veges and salads for a healthy flavour punch.



**Hoummos**

Low in saturated fat and rich in nutrients  
**HFG TIP** Use to add flavour to sandwiches and veg-packed wraps.

Text: Melissa Meier. Photos: iStock.