

Which Spread is Better for My Heart — Butter or Margarine?

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Margarine is made from vegetable oils, so it contains no cholesterol. Margarine is also higher in "good" fats — polyunsaturated and monounsaturated — than butter is. These types of fat help reduce low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or "bad," cholesterol, when substituted for saturated fat. Butter, on the other hand, is made from animal fat, so it contains cholesterol and high levels of saturated fat.

But not all margarines are created equal — and some may even be worse than butter. In general, the more solid the margarine, the more trans fat it contains — so stick margarines usually have more trans fat than do tub margarines. Like saturated fat, trans fat increases blood cholesterol and the risk of heart disease. In addition, trans fat can lower high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or "good," cholesterol levels. Spreads such as Benecol and Promise Activ are fortified with plant stanols and sterols, which can help reduce LDL cholesterol levels.

When selecting a spread, be sure to check the Nutrition Facts panel and pay particular attention to the grams of saturated fat and trans fat. Look for products that have the lowest combined amount. Also, look for products with a low percent Daily Value for cholesterol.

If you don't like the taste of margarine or don't want to give up butter completely, consider using whipped or light butter. Or look for products that are a blend of butter and olive or canola oil. Per serving, these products have less fat and calories than regular butter does. The important thing is to use them sparingly.