

Plant-based oils

If you have a food allergy, you will need to know whether oils made from the food you are allergic to are safe for you to eat. Here you can read about plant-based oils, including those made from common food allergens, and which you may need to avoid.

Which plant-based oils are used in the UK?

Plant-based oils can come from many different types of plants and seeds, including:

- peanut
- soya
- sesame seeds
- tree nuts
- rapeseed
- sunflower seeds
- olives
- maize/corn
- palm
- coconut
- shea nut.

How do I know if a food contains a plant-based oil?

The name of any oil used in the ingredients must be stated on the label of pre-packaged foods.

There are [14 major food allergens](#) in the UK, and these must be emphasised on ingredients labels (in bold for example), so that people with allergies can easily spot them. Foods that are not in the top 14 don't need to be emphasised but they do need to be listed.

Will I need to avoid plant-based oils made from the food I am allergic to?

If you have an allergy to a food, you will usually need to avoid oils made from it and any foods that contain it, so always check the ingredient label. Sometimes, whether you

need to avoid the oil will depend on whether the oil is **refined** or **unrefined**. If you are not sure, it's best to avoid it.

Refined and unrefined oils – what's the difference?

Refined oils

The oils used in pre-packed foods are usually refined. The refining process removes the proteins to the point where they are barely detectable. As it is the proteins that cause allergic reactions, fully refined oils are unlikely to cause a reaction.

Soya and peanut oils have been researched and are known to be low risk. While other refined oils are probably low risk too, more research is needed to know for sure.

Unrefined oils

Unrefined oils have only been lightly filtered and have not been through the same amount of processing. They are sometimes used to add flavour to foods. **Unrefined** sesame oil and peanut oil can be used in dressings and marinades for example. As these still contain their proteins, they are more likely to cause a reaction.

Peanut oil (also known as groundnut oil)

Peanuts are a type of legume and one of the [14 major allergens](#) in the UK. Peanut oil must always be emphasised on ingredients lists, in bold for example, whether the oil is refined or unrefined.

- **Refined** peanut oil is likely to be safe for most people with peanut allergy.
- **Unrefined** peanut oil still contains its proteins so is more likely to cause allergic reactions. It's rarely used in pre-packed foods but it could sometimes be used to give a peanut flavour.

[Read about peanut oil.](#)

Soya oil

Soya oil is made from soyabeans, a type of legume, and is sometimes used in foods such as salad dressings, margarine and spreads. Soya is one of the 14 major allergens in the UK so it usually needs to be emphasised on food labels.

Soya oil has been researched and has been through a full risk assessment. The European Food Safety Authority declared in 2007 that “it is not very likely” that fully **refined** soya oils would trigger a serious allergic reaction in people with soya allergy.

- Fully **refined** soya oil does **not** have to be emphasised on ingredients labels but it still needs to be listed. It is the only plant-based oil from the top 14 allergens that doesn't have to be emphasised if it's been refined.
- **Unrefined** soya oil is more likely to cause reactions and **must be emphasised** in the ingredients list. It may be listed simply as soya oil.

[Read our Soya allergy factsheet](#)

Other plant-based oils

No other plant-based oils have been researched to test whether refining them makes them safe for people with allergies to those foods. Some **refined** oils could potentially cause a reaction if they still contain traces of protein – sometimes traces of protein can be left behind after processing. Speak to your GP or allergy specialist about whether you need to avoid oils made from your food allergen.

Coconut oil

Coconuts are not nuts but are 'drupes', which is a type of fruit with a hard stony covering. They grow on coconut trees which are members of the Palm family.

Coconut oil is usually a cold-pressed oil. This is **unrefined** so it's possible it could cause an allergic reaction in people with a coconut allergy.

[Read our factsheet on Seeds and foods with 'nuts' in the name](#)

Sesame oil

Sesame is one of the 14 major allergens. Sesame oil is usually **unrefined** so is likely to cause an allergic reaction for people with a sesame allergy.

[Read our Sesame allergy factsheet](#)

Tree nut oils

Tree nuts are included in the list of 14 major allergens. Some tree nut oils, such as walnut oil, are **unrefined** so they could cause allergic reactions in people with tree nut allergies.

Some tree nut oils are **refined** and would be less likely to cause an allergic reaction. Because there's not enough research to know for sure, it's safest to avoid the oil if you have an allergy to a tree nut.

[Read our Peanut and tree nuts factsheet](#)

Shea nut oil (shea nut butter)

Shea nuts are the seeds of the fruit of Shea trees which grow mainly in Africa. Shea nut oil, also known as shea nut butter or shea butter, is used in some foods such as chocolate, sweets and ice cream.

It is a **refined** product and does not contain any detectable proteins. It is not thought to cause allergic reactions and no cases of allergy to shea nut or shea nut butter have ever been reported.

[Read our factsheet on Seeds and foods with 'nuts' in the name](#)

Can plant-based oils in cosmetic or pharmaceutical products cause allergic reactions?

There have not been any good quality studies to answer this question. Pharmaceutical and cosmetic grade refined plant-based oils are usually highly purified so the evidence would suggest they are unlikely to pose any risk. But because this is not certain, you might prefer to avoid these products if you have an allergy to the food the oil is made

from. The names on cosmetics and toiletries are often in Latin.

Read more about the labelling of food ingredients in cosmetics products in our [Cosmetics, personal care products and medicines factsheet](#).

Key messages

- Plant-based oils can come from many different types of plants and seeds, including some common allergens.
- Plant-based oils can be refined or unrefined and, in general, refined oils are less likely to cause a reaction.
- Refined soya and refined peanut oils have been researched and are known to be low risk.
- Speak to your GP or allergy specialist about whether you need to avoid oils made from your food allergen.

Feedback

Please help us to improve our information resources by sending us your feedback at:

<https://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/information-resources-feedback/>

Sources

All the information we produce is evidence based or follows expert opinion and is checked by our clinical and research reviewers. If you wish to know the sources we used in producing any of our information products, please contact info@anaphylaxis.org.uk and we will gladly supply details.

Reviewer

This factsheet has been peer reviewed by Tanya Wright, Specialist Allergy Dietitian, Children's Allergy Service at Guys and St Thomas' Hospital, London.

Disclosures

We are not aware of any conflicts of interest in relation to the review of this factsheet.

Disclaimer

The information provided in this factsheet is given in good faith. Every effort is taken to ensure accuracy. All patients are different, and specific cases need specific advice. There is no substitute for good medical advice provided by a medical professional.

About Anaphylaxis UK

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