

# The Trouble With French Fries Is Not the Oil

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By Emily Oster

Dr. Oster is the founder and C.E.O. of [ParentData.org](https://parentdata.org) and a professor of economics at Brown University.

Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is right when he says that chronic disease is on the rise in America and that our food system is at least partly to blame. Where he and his “Make America Healthy Again” movement err is in relying on flawed evidence to target particular foods.

Let’s take seed oils. Mr. Kennedy has claimed that oils made from seeds — sunflower, safflower, canola — [have “poisoned”](#) Americans, and are “one of the driving causes” of the obesity epidemic.

The fear over seed oils stems from the fact that they tend to be high in one type of unsaturated fat, omega-6 fatty acids, whereas olive oils have more omega-3 fatty acids. Studies have found that people who consume a higher ratio of omega 6 to omega-3 fatty acids in their diet tend to have worse health.

The problem is that most of those studies are poorly designed to show how omega-6 fatty acids, or seed oils that contain them, are actually causing the negative health effects.

Seed oils are prevalent in processed and fast foods. That’s because they are cheap and also have a high smoke point, which is good for frying. There’s evidence that many ultraprocessed foods harm our health, but is the problem the seed oils, or the foods they are used in? A meal from Taco Bell is more likely to contain seed oils than a salad and chicken breast cooked at home with olive oil, but the oils probably aren’t the reason the former is less healthy.

People who eat a lot of ultraprocessed foods may differ in other ways that affect health, like their education levels, exercise habits and whether they smoke. Research papers commonly address this concern by trying to adjust for differences across individuals, but they simply [can’t control](#) for all the factors that are associated with different dietary choices.

It’s not just seed oils. Studies that show only patterns, not cause and effect, are pervasive in the field of nutrition research. Those headlines linking [red meat](#) to cancer or [coffee](#) to longevity are based on studies that find connections between foods and health but that cannot determine if one causes the other. When we fixate on individual foods or ingredients, we miss the bigger picture — implying that chronic disease would be fixed by, say, removing [food dyes from Skittles](#).

Often, with better data, the conclusions of nutrition studies based on observational findings turn out to be wrong. For decades, people thought fat was the enemy and dietary guidelines encouraged people to eat less of it, and more carbohydrates. Then, [a landmark study](#) in 2006 showed that women randomly assigned to follow a low-fat diet were no less likely to suffer from heart disease or stroke than people who ate more fat.

It is not that we know nothing about nutrition. A [large randomized trial](#) has shown benefits of a Mediterranean style-diet, and evidence from high-quality nutrition studies has shown a diet high in ultraprocessed foods results in eating more, leading to weight gain. The general advice to eat mostly whole foods and not too much is reasonable. Where the evidence falls apart is when it turns to specific foods.

If it is so bad, why is this deeply flawed evidence so widely produced and so popular in the media? One reason: These kind of studies make health changes seem easy. If only you quit seed oils or drink more coffee, you'll be healthier. Focusing on individual ingredients also benefits policymakers who want to claim wins. There is no good evidence to suggest sugar is healthier than high fructose corn syrup, and yet fear of the latter has allowed Mr. Kennedy to [claim a victory](#) when Coca-Cola promised to offer American consumers a version of Coke sweetened with cane sugar instead of corn syrup.

A skeptical person may ask: If association studies are all we have, shouldn't we rely on them until we know more? What's the harm with cutting out seed oils?

Relying on bad evidence can lead to significant mistakes. Correlational evidence about the health risks of butter led people to substitute margarine instead; at the time, this contained trans fats, which turned out to be more concerning than butter for heart health. Mr. Kennedy has promoted replacing seed oils with tallow, nevermind that the saturated fat in tallow is probably worse for one's health. Worse, the current panic over seed oils has led some parents to worry about seed oil use in infant formula. These oils are necessary for the formula to mimic the nutrient composition of breast milk, but there are now parents seeking to make their own formula to avoid them.

Given the poor state of health in the United States, we desperately need better nutrition data. Scientists need to stop producing and amplifying so much flawed research. Journals should be more skeptical of publishing this research; media organizations should cover it less.

That will free up resources for more creative and ambitious studies that can establish not just associations, but whether something is actually causing the health effect in question. An example is a [recent publication in the journal Science](#) that examined the impact of sugar exposure in childhood by comparing children born during sugar rationing in Britain after World War II or just after the rationing ended. They found that early sugar exposure leads to more disease later in life.

The National Institutes of Health should fund a large-scale, randomized controlled trial to evaluate the impact of different diets on health. The study could evaluate not only health outcomes, but also how easy it was for people to stick to the recommended diet, perhaps the most significant challenge in changing people's eating habits.

Such a study, which would ideally include perhaps one million people followed for several years, would be extremely expensive. But in the end, we would actually learn what drives health outcomes. If the current administration wants to get serious about fixing nutrition science, this is the place to start.

[https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/08/opinion/seed-oils-nutrition-ingredients-science.html?campaign\\_id=39&emc=edit\\_ty\\_20250808&instance\\_id=160163&nl=opinion-today&regi\\_id=135758037&segment\\_id=203517&user\\_id=10c18394cac62d2e4a7c00787bada245](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/08/opinion/seed-oils-nutrition-ingredients-science.html?campaign_id=39&emc=edit_ty_20250808&instance_id=160163&nl=opinion-today&regi_id=135758037&segment_id=203517&user_id=10c18394cac62d2e4a7c00787bada245)