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The hidden Danger in Cooking Oil: Understanding the Adulteration of Palm Oil

Oluwatoyin Zaka, David Ahmed Adamu and Deborah Olabode
Research Outreach Department, Nigerian Stored Products Research Institute, Nigeria

SUMMARY

Palm oil is a fat rich source, essential commodity of great economic importance in Nigeria food system. It remains widely used in both traditional and food industry in the generations of human history. It is high in antioxidants, vitamin K, E and A which contains beneficial carotenoid. All these enhance healthy skin, vision and immune system. *Elaeis guineesis* produces high quantity of oil over small areas of land all year round with steady income which make it attractive to grower. However, the adulteration of palm oil is now a major food safety concern. This article examines the prevalence, causes and implication of palm oil adulteration. Many engagers indulge in a practice of adding harmful substances such as dye, kerosene, cheaper vegetable oil or reused oil with endless of others to palm oil. This is to increase their profit margin at the expense of the consumers, not minding the risks such as nutritional degradation, organ damage and cancerous diseases posed. This review also includes socioeconomic impact of this practice on producers and national trade reputation. Simple detection methods of the adulterated commodity were outlined, while strong calls were made to regulatory enforcement, quality control and consumer education to take proper and adequate measure to ensure the purity of palm oil. These are steps which are crucial in safeguarding public health, restoration of market trust and sustainability of the palm oil value.

INTRODUCTION

Palm oil, fondly called "the red gold of Africa," is one of the most consumed edible oils in Nigeria and many parts of the world. It is rich in vitamins A and E, and serves as a key ingredient in cooking, food processing, and cosmetics. However, growing concerns have emerged about the adulteration of palm oil, a practice where unscrupulous vendors mix genuine palm oil with harmful substances to improve color, volume, or profit margins.

Palm oil adulteration involves the deliberate addition of foreign substances such as artificial dyes (like Sudan III or IV), used cooking oil, or other cheaper vegetable oils. These additives may enhance the oil's color or texture, deceiving consumers into thinking they are buying high-quality products (Okechalu et al., 2011). Common additives include Sudan dyes, recycled oil, and cheaper vegetable oils, all of which degrade quality and introduce toxic compounds (Onyeonagu et al., 2018). Studies show that adulterated palm oil can cause organ damage, oxidative stress, and even cancer (Okechalu et al., 2011). This act not only reduces nutritional value but also poses serious health risks to consumers. Despite these dangers, local markets still sell such commodity.

Nigeria being one of the top palm oil producer established agencies such as the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) and the Standards Organisation of Nigeria (SON) to regulate food quality. However, limited resources, insufficient laboratory capacity, poor coordination, and corruption hinder their effectiveness (FAO, 2020). Millions of potential export earnings are lost due to questionable quality of Nigeria palm oil (FAO, 2020). Many small-scale processors operate informally, outside official oversight, while regulatory inspections are often reactive rather than preventive. The absence of traceability systems also makes it difficult to identify the source of adulterated products once they reach consumers.

Potential risks of palm oil Adulteration

Adulteration of palm oil has severe health consequences. Sudan dyes are carcinogenic, potentially leading to liver and kidney damage, and long-term exposure may increase cancer risk (Onyeonagu et al., 2018). Recycled or oxidized oils contain peroxides that can cause digestive disorders, heart diseases, and cellular damage. Over time, these contaminants accumulate in body tissues, impairing normal metabolic function and weakening immunity. Beyond health, adulteration undermines consumer trust, damages export potential, and discourages genuine producers.

Precautional Measures

Consumers can take these simple steps to determine the quality of palm oil they are about to purchase:

- Observe color: genuine palm oil is deep reddish-orange, not overly bright or fluorescent.
- Smell and texture: pure oil has a natural nutty aroma and thick texture, not watery or chemical-smelling.
- Use basic tests: when palm oil is refrigerated, adulterated samples often separate into layers.

Producers should embrace Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), while government agencies such as NAFDAC and SON must intensify quality monitoring and public sensitization.

Recommendation

1. NAFDAC and SON should increase routine sampling and testing at all levels of distribution through regular market surveillance.
2. Implementation of fines and prosecution for offenders to discourage adulteration by the Legal arm of Government.
3. Equip laboratories and train inspectors in modern analytical techniques like FTIR spectroscopy, chromatography, and chemometric tools for easy detection of adulteration of oil.
4. Encourage collaboration with producer associations and research institutions for self-regulation.
5. Use media campaigns to inform the public on identifying and reporting adulterated products.

CONCLUSION

Palm oil adulteration threatens both food safety and public health. The purity requires adherence to quality standards which should be collective effort from all the stakeholders. The “red gold” should nourish, not harm, those who consume it. Stricter enforcement against palm oil adulteration should therefore not be a mere regulatory demand, but rather a public health necessity and an economic safeguard. With all stakeholders working together as an entity, every drop of palm oil sold is ensured safe, pure and beneficial. Hence, Nigerian reputation on palm oil market can be restored to pave way for competitiveness in both regional and international trade.

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