

CHEAP — AND NASTY

You could get cancer from the used oil sold on city streets

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TOXIC used cooking oil is being sold on Joburg's streets for as little as R6 a litre.

Although it is illegal, corner cafés and fast-food outlets are selling the dangerous oil, which experts say is poisonous and can cause cancer, heart disease and other illnesses because it breaks down chemically into compounds that resemble wood varnish every time it is heated.

Those, and other, compounds spark the production of cancer cells that people infected with HIV have a reduced ability to fight.

This week, Metro paid R29 for a five-litre bottle of used cooking oil from Thom's Café, a takeaway in Booyens, south Joburg.

The café sells used oil, reheated many times and used to fry fish, to fast-food vendors and poor householders from Soweto to Vlakkfontein.

Under the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act it is illegal to use such poor quality oil in restaurants. However, the Health Department could not tell Metro what penalties were in place regarding the sale of overused oil to the public. Nor could the department outline the penalties restaurants faced for cooking with overused oil.

The rancid, mahogany-coloured oil that Metro bought was sent to Free State University Professor Lodewyk Kock for testing. He has researched the use of "abused oil" for 12 years.

Kock found that:

- The oil was highly chemically degraded;

- One more heating of the oil

would render it dangerous to whoever consumed it; and

- That the use of the oil could make progressive illnesses worse if consumed by anyone infected by HIV.

The owner of Thom's Café, known only as Ronnie to his customers, refused to tell Metro why he was selling the stuff.

He said, "Sorry, no comment," and cut the call. He then switched his phone off.

Kock's research led to the introduction of regulations relating to overused oil in 1996.

"But it still is a huge problem. One in eight restaurants in the country still overuse their oil until it is unhealthy, and in Gauteng it is one in five," he said.

Kock said although it was not known exactly how many restaurants and takeaways in the province were selling used oil, he did say Gauteng was a hotspot.

"In the townships they call it fish oil because of the fishy taste, and people think this makes it have a higher nutritional value than new oil. But a dark colour and strong acrid smell show that the oil is not fit for use," he said.

But Thom's Café's customers don't think so.

Dudzile Gumede, who sells food near Soweto's Orlando Station, says it's cheaper to buy used oil. "My business has been flourishing and I can see a big profit because I don't spend a lot of money on oil, which is very expensive."

"Five litres of used oil is a mere R29 and it lasts me about three weeks. In my business, the biggest cost is oil so this is another way of saving."

Gumede said she phoned the owner of the store and asked him

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to keep used oil aside for her because it sold out quickly.

"Last December I ordered five bottles of this oil for my son's wedding. No one complained of stomach aches. Nor have my customers been ill from my food."

When told that used oil was toxic, Gumede did not believe it.

"My parents used to buy it and cook with it and nothing ever happened to us," she said.

Another customer, Busisiwe Zondo, a housewife and mother of four from Soweto, agreed.

'Cafés don't realise the oil is dangerous. If they can make a few rands, they will'

"I have been using it for years. I know of many families in my area that are using this oil."

Kock said a recent study conducted in South Africa and published in a US medical journal showed that the use of abused oil aided the progression of illness in those living with HIV/Aids.

Although strict measures have been in place for larger fast-food chains, many corner cafés are selling their used oil to staff and customers.

Biotechnologist Dr Gareth

Cambray said the sale of used oil was "still a huge problem".

"All the organised franchises now ensure that used oil gets destroyed, but corner cafés don't realise the oil is dangerous. If they can sell it and make a few rands, they will," he said.

Kock said used restaurant oil should be collected by distributors and used to make soap, biodiesel or animal feed.

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