

ALLERGY, VITAMINS

A SHORT HISTORY OF STEAMED COD LIVER OIL

26.09.2007

First use of liver cod oil probably originates with the fishing communities of Norway, Greenland and Iceland several centuries ago - an excellent reference is at "[Cod liver oil and chemistry](#)" 1895 by Peckel Möller. This book has a nice account on fishing at the Lofotes around the turn of the last century with many details about the cod fish migration.

The first medical use is being dated to 1789 and [credited](#) to Dr Darbey of Manchester Infirmary.

100 liter of liver oil could be produced from about 400 livers simply by letting the livers (including gallbladder) rot for several months. As might be imagined, smell, taste and digestion of this primitive preparation was terrible and only consumed by a few people when in 1853 a new steam based extraction could be invented producing a more or less colorless oil. By this invention Norway continued to be the main producer of liver cod oil

In this way the storekeepers are enabled to collect the cod livers from great numbers of the fishermen, and as a consequence they supply by far the largest amount of the raw medicinal oil which comes into the market. / The storekeepers and fishermen send almost all their products to / Bergen, which is, therefore, the great emporium for cod-liver oil, but none is manufactured there. / When the oils reach Bergen they are set aside for a time in order to allow water and impurities to settle. When this has been completed the oil is drawn off, and such as happens to be deficient in the properties qualifying it for one of the four classes above mentioned is boiled, mixed, and manipulated until it has acquired those properties. Sworn sorters, who are appointed by the city of Bergen, may be called in to decide disputes as to the quality of an oil.

According to a later [report in 1932](#) Norwegian liver cod sales kept to be high while the oil was mainly used as poultry feed at that time.

Britain, Italy, and Germany. Exports of steamed medicinal cod liver oil from Norway:

	1927	1929	1931
	Hectoliters	Hectoliters	Hectoliters
United States..	35,127	49,235	25,674
Great Britain..	16,000	19,023	18,942
Italy	5,379	10,304	10,693
Germany	9,537	12,483	9,461
Other countries.	26,405	40,722	35,123
Total	92,448	131,767	99,893

This might be interesting as vitamin D could be chemically synthesized as “Vigantol” since 1927 ([shown in a new book on Windaus](#)) while liver cod oil is still on the [market today](#).

The Möller book already answers the question about differences between chemically synthesized vitamin D and liver cod oil (the oily preparation [seems to be pharmacological different even in current research](#)). Liver cod oil contains phosphate and calcium

	Calcium oxide	Magnesia	Sodium oxide
	%	%	%
Brown oil contained . . .	0.0817	0.0088	0.0179
Light brown oil contained	0.1678	0.0123	0.0681
Pale oil contained . . .	0.1515	0.0088	0.0554

as well as many unsaturated fatty acids. Is this co-application of vitamin D with calcium and unsaturated fatty acids responsible that liver cod oil did not induce an allergy epidemic around ~1880 as might be assumed from its vitamin D content?

Bergen continues to be the cod oil capital – see the [Hordaland](#) and the [Rhine](#) study.

