

The Value of Coconut and Coconut Oil

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Throughout History

Coconuts and coconut oil have been eaten as a primary food for thousands of years by millions of people in Asia, the Pacific Islands, Africa, and Central America. Interestingly, many cultures have depended on coconut to sustain life, yet they do not suffer from heart disease, cancer, arthritis, diabetes, and other modern degenerative diseases¹ often wrongly blamed on saturated fat consumption. It is only when these cultures abandon their traditional coconut-based diet and begin eating “modern foods,” such as sugar, white flour, and damaged fats, that these diseases start appearing.² In fact, some Polynesians consume up to 60% of their total caloric intake from fat, primarily coming from coconut, and they are one of the healthiest civilizations on earth.³

The oil produced from the coconut may be its most remarkable product. This oil, natural and nonhydrogenated, has a long history of use around the world, not only as a valuable source of nutrients, but also as a medicinal food. At one time coconut oil was commonly used in the US for baking, pastries, frying, and theater popcorn. Unfortunate circumstances led to the anti-saturated fat campaign and POOF – suddenly coconut oil was unfairly deemed unhealthy, and vegetable oil was in vogue.

Repairing Saturated Fat’s Reputation

When I mention coconut oil, the instinctive response of many is “isn’t that full of saturated fat? Oh no, I can’t eat that!” Although it is true coconut oil consists of primary saturated fats, it is important to understand a few things. First, saturated fat is not the “evil” nutrient it is often viewed as being. Second, there are different types of saturated fat, and some have very therapeutic effects on the body. Lastly, if coconut oil did have any adverse health effects associated with it, we would see it reflected in the mortality rates of countries that consume it in high quantities.³ Although I would love to go into specific detail on the subject of saturated fat, alas I am restricted by space. So here is a severely abridged explanation of saturated fat’s benefits to help repair its damaged reputation.

Besides supporting immune system function⁴ and helping maintain cell integrity⁵, one of the most healthful attributes of saturated fat is its stability. This means it does not normally go rancid inside the body or when heated during cooking.^{5,6} It helps prevent other oils from going rancid in the body as well,⁵ which is desirable because rancid oils breed free radicals – disease-causing unstable molecules in the body.^{5,7,8}

MCFAs – What Makes Coconut So Special

Coconut is abundantly endowed with special fatty acids called *medium chain saturated fatty acids* (MCFAs), which are digested and handled by the body differently than other fats. As the name implies, they are shorter in length than most of the fatty acids that we find in fats and oils. Their length allows them to be directly absorbed from the intestines and sent straight to the liver for quick energy.^{3,9} Longer chain fatty acids require enzymes and packaging that takes more energy and time to process through the body.³ MCFAs also contribute to the health of the immune system¹⁰ and provide a number of other health benefits.³

Infection Fighting Power

Coconut oil is an antimicrobial food thanks to its MCFAs.^{11,12,13,14} Once eaten, the body transforms the MCFAs into powerful antimicrobial agents capable of defending the body against nasty microorganisms. The most abundant and potent MCFA is lauric acid, which comprises nearly 50% of coconut’s fat content.^{3,5, 15,17,21} Laboratory tests have shown that the MCFAs found in coconut oil are effective in destroying a wide assortment of infectious agents. For instance, they can be effective against viruses that cause influenza, measles, herpes, as well as bacteria that can lead to

stomach ulcers, sinusitis, dental cavities, food poisoning, and urinary tract infections. They can also help combat yeast overgrowth, such as candida and thrush.^{3,15} No wonder lauric acid is one of the principle fats in mother's milk to protect a delicate nursing baby from harmful pathogens.^{3,16,17} As stated by Bruce Fife, N.D., author of *The Healing Miracles of Coconut Oil*, "Coconut oil may prove to be one of the best internal antimicrobial substances available without a doctor's prescription." If you feel the beginnings of the flu or other infection, try eating dried coconut or coconut oil; it may help you fight it off.³

Coconut's Other Health Bennies

Healing: The MCFAs in coconut oil are easily digested, absorbed, and quickly used to nourish the body, which lightens the strain on the pancreas and digestive system. This allows for healing energies to be directed to where they are needed most. Consequently, MCFAs have been used in hospital formulas to feed the very young, the critically ill, and those with digestive problems.³

Metabolism & Energy: The thyroid is the metabolic manager of the body, which directs all bodily functions. Coconut is one of the few thyroid-activating substances and actually supports the body's use of thyroid hormones, and thus increases metabolism.^{3,21} For example, the basal metabolism of the people of Yucatan, where coconut is a staple food, is on average 25% higher than that of people in the United States.¹⁸ Additionally, because MCFAs are easily absorbed by the energy-producing part of the cells, there is an increase in metabolism as well as energy.³

Disease Prevention: The underlying cause of most disease is free radicals.⁷ These renegade molecules cause damage to cells and tissues, and are generated by destructive substances found in our air, food, and water. One of the most dangerous dietary substances is *oxidized fat*. This is when rancid fats are consumed, as well as when fats go rancid inside the body. Vegetable oils are more susceptible to rancidity due to their molecular structure.^{5,8} The only way to stop free radicals is with antioxidants, molecules that neutralize free radicals, making them harmless. Coconut oil acts like an antioxidant-assistant by reducing oxidation in the body and sparing one's antioxidant supply. Because this oil is so resistant to free radical attack, it helps prevent the oxidation of other oils in the body.^{3,15,17,21} This is extremely valuable in the realm of disease prevention!

Coconut oil has actually been shown to be beneficial to heart health¹⁹ and may help lower the bad LDL cholesterol and raise the good HDL.²⁰ A review of epidemiological and experimental data regarding coconut-eating populations shows that dietary coconut oil does not lead to coronary heart disease.^{19,20}

Weight Loss: In the 1940's farmers tried coconut oil to fatten their animals, but instead it made them lean and active. WHOOPS!²¹ This demonstrates the incredible fact that coconut oil can actually promote weight loss. The MCFAs do not circulate in the bloodstream like other fats, but are immediately converted into energy. In other words, they are burned instead of being stored as body fat.¹⁷ The MCFAs also speed up the body's metabolism (up to a 50% boost²²), burning more calories,^{23,24} ultimately promoting weight loss and resisting weight gain.^{3,8} Lastly, these fats keep your blood sugar stable, and burn longer and more steadily than other foods so there are no spikes or slumps in blood sugar levels.^{3,8} This helps prevent cravings and bingeing, two driving factors behind weight gain.

Coconut can be a golden asset in a whole foods diet, and support a disease-preventing lifestyle. It truly is a "functional food," meaning it provides health benefits beyond its nutritional content. Medical researchers and health care professionals continue to discover new health benefits associated with coconut and its oil – isn't it time you started using this amazing super food for yourself? Coconut's good taste, lasting stability, and evident health benefits make it a terrific food to incorporate back into our way of life.

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