

The Truth About Coconut Oil

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Have you been hearing about how amazing coconut oil is these days? Health claims surround this tropical oil, as well as controversy. Here are some facts you need to know about coconut oil.

There are two main types of coconut oil used in cooking and baking: Virgin and refined. “Virgin” coconut oil is extracted from the fruit of fresh mature coconuts without using high temperatures or chemicals. This is considered unrefined. “Refined” coconut oil is made from dried coconut meat that’s often chemically bleached and deodorized. Some food manufacturers may use yet another form of coconut oil that’s further processed: partially hydrogenated coconut oil.

The coconut oil that you’ll find on the grocery store shelf, whether virgin or refined, is high in saturated fat — more so than butter. In fact, it’s a solid fat. One tablespoon of coconut oil provides 117 calories, 13.6g total fat (with 11.8g saturated fat), no protein or carbohydrates, and trace amounts of vitamins and minerals. Like all other plant-based oils, it doesn’t contain cholesterol.

With the exception of palm kernel oil, all other common culinary oils, including canola and extra-virgin olive oil, contain significantly less saturated fat than coconut oil.

Virgin coconut oil has some antioxidant properties, potentially because of plant nutrients called phenolic compounds. Be cautious of processed food products, such as commercial baked goods, that contain hydrogenated coconut oil. The further processing of coconut oil transforms some of the unsaturated fats into trans fats.

There’s a lot of “hype” surrounding coconut oil. These exclaim the benefits of coconut oil for everything from weight loss to Alzheimer’s disease. The truth is that there isn’t yet enough scientific evidence to support all of these claims about the oil’s potential health benefits.

When it comes to fats, most of what you eat should be monounsaturated or polyunsaturated, like you find in canola, olive, and peanut oil, nuts, seeds, and avocados. The American Heart Association recommends limiting saturated fats in your diet to <7% and trans fat to <1% of your total daily calories. These guidelines have been established because saturated fats and trans fats are associated with increased total cholesterol and low density lipoprotein (LDL) “bad” cholesterol, as well as increased risk for coronary artery disease. Though virgin coconut oil is high in lauric acid, which is a saturated fat that’s classified as a medium-chain fatty acid; it can raise both “bad” and “good” cholesterol levels. There’s some evidence suggesting that coconut oil intake may be associated with a neutral, if not beneficial, effect on cholesterol levels. The bottom line is to skip food products that contain partially hydrogenated coconut oil. Choose

virgin coconut oil and use it in moderation. Despite emerging research, the recommendation is still to limit your total saturated fat intake.

So how do you cook with coconut oil? Virgin coconut oil has a very light, sweet-nutty coconut flavor and aroma. It's ideal for baking or medium-heat sautéing — up to about 350°F. Refined coconut oil is basically tasteless. It can be used for baking or for medium-high heat sautéing or stir-frying — up to about 425°F. Though high in saturated fat, virgin coconut oil doesn't contain trans fat, making it a better choice than trans fat-containing shortening. And for vegans or strict vegetarians, coconut oil offers a plant-based replacement for butter that stands up well in baking or sautéing.

For more information about good fats or how to improve your cholesterol, contact Nutrition Care at (719) 526-7290 and sign up for our Heart Healthy class. Also check out the Cooking Tips and Trends information at <http://www.eatright.org> .