



Coconut Oil: The **Low-calorie Fat**

What once was out now is in. Coconut oil may have gotten a bad rap in the 1980s along with other saturated fats, tropical oils in particular, but research is beginning to show that coconut oil deserves another chance. Amazingly enough, coconut oil has been found to boost the metabolism, augment the immune system, act as a powerful antioxidant, and make skin softer and smoother. It seems like there is nothing that coconut oil can't do.

Fewer Calories Than Other Fats with Many Healthy Benefits

So why did coconut oil suffer from a bad reputation? It is true that it is one of the most saturated fats around, but it actually has slightly fewer calories than other fats. According to Bruce Fife, N.D., author of *The Healing Miracles of Coconut Oil*, coconut oil acts differently from most other fats because it consists mostly of medium chain fatty acids (MCFAs). Typically, fats are broken down in the body and repackaged as lipoproteins that will travel through the blood and collect in fat cells.

Reduces Body Fat and Increases Energy

Medium chain fatty acids are different because they are sent straight to the liver and immediately converted to energy, acting more like a carbohydrate than a fat. Fife also reports that coconut oil causes a higher post-meal metabolic boost than protein, which means more calories are burned. Fife cites several studies in which replacing long chain fatty acids (LCFAs) with MCFAs significantly reduced body fat, resulting in a lower body weight. Udo Erasmus, author of *Fats That Heal, Fats That Kill*, agrees that shorter chain fatty acids (SCFAs) "bum" better than LCFAs in the Krebs cycle, the process in which cells produce energy. MCFAs can even help bum LCFAs, and actually leave a person feeling more satisfied after eating and disposed to eat less at the next meal.

Does Not Increase Cholesterol

Past claims that coconut oil increases cholesterol have now proved unfounded. One study in the 1960s concluded that coconut oil increased serum (blood) cholesterol, but it was in fact the omission of essential fatty acids that increased the cholesterol. Other research that concluded polyunsaturated fatty acids lowered serum cholesterol failed to reveal that the cholesterol moved into body tissues such as the liver and arteries.

Unrefined Virgin Coconut Oil Protects Against Heart Disease

Other tests were conducted with hydrogenated coconut oil, which has a completely different chemical makeup from virgin coconut oil and none of the same benefits. Subject groups studied in the South Pacific, where coconut, in its natural state, is a major staple of the population's diet exhibited low occurrences of coronary heart disease and other degenerative diseases and low serum cholesterol levels. When islanders migrated to New Zealand and decreased their intake of coconut oil, their total cholesterol and LDL cholesterol (the bad kind) went up and HDL cholesterol (the good kind) went down.

Stimulates Metabolism and Normalizes Cholesterol

According to the research of Ray Peat, Ph.D., a biochemist, and Mary G. Enig Ph.D., a biochemist, nutritionist and leading authority on fats and oils, coconut oil has additional health benefits that you would hardly expect from a fat. Coconut oil actually stimulates thyroid activity, thus increasing the metabolic rate and normalizing cholesterol by converting it (specifically LDL cholesterol, the bad kind) into vital anti-aging steroids, pregnenolone, progesterone and DHEA. Coconut oil lowers cholesterol!

Normalizes Blood Fats, Protects Liver, and Improves Immune System

Enig also explains that coconut oil is about 50% lauric acid, which is a beneficial fatty acid also found in abundance in human breast milk. Lauric acid forms into monolaurin in the body, which is the anti-viral, antibacterial and antiprotozoal monoglyceride used by the body to destroy lipid coated viruses, various bacteria and protozoa. Coconut oil also consists of capric acid, which also forms into monolaurin and has antimicrobial properties. Furthermore, Enig says that natural coconut fat normalizes body lipids, protects against alcohol damage in the liver and improves the immune system's anti-inflammatory response.

Antioxidant Properties

Coconut oil also possesses numerous antioxidant properties. Its natural antioxidants, in addition to its status as an already saturated fat and lack of any essential fatty acids, give coconut oil a long shelf life (over a year without refrigeration) and resistance to change from heat, making it good for cooking. Peat also explains, "It is well established that dietary coconut oil reduces our need for vitamin E, but I think its antioxidant role is more general than that, and that it has both direct and indirect antioxidant activities." Its antioxidant properties are especially noticeable in the outward appearance of the skin. Antioxidants, whether taken internally or applied externally, are effective in preventing the free-radical damage that can lead to aged and wrinkled skin.

Protects Skin Against Premature Aging and Wrinkling

Fife explains that coconut oil applied directly to the skin helps keep skin soft and smooth, helps prevent premature aging and wrinkling and helps protect against skin cancer and other blemishes. Its small molecular structure makes it easy to absorb and it is a good ointment for relief of dry and rough skin.

Healthy Substitute for Butter and Margarine

With Congress' recent decision to require the trans fat content on nutritional labels by 2006, many are expecting coconut oil to make a comeback. Its numerous benefits can be experienced with about 3.5 tablespoons a day of non-hydrogenated, unrefined virgin coconut oil. It is a great substitute for butter or margarine for spreads or any oil for baking. **WF**

References:

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