



Q&A: Coconut Oil & the Heart

Q: is coconut oil good for me?

Traditionally, coconut oil hasn't been recommended because it is extremely high in saturated fat. This advice remains, despite the large number of marketing claims to the contrary. The evidence for claims about coconut oil's heart healthiness just doesn't stack up.

The small amount of research that has been conducted on coconut oil in humans suggests it is better than butter for cholesterol levels, but not as good as other non-hydrogenated plant oils that are lower in saturated fat.

Q: The websites on coconut oil list a lot of research to support their claims?

They do. But much of that research was conducted in animals or with MCT oils. There is very little good quality research on the effect of coconut oil consumption in humans.

Q: But isn't coconut an MCT?

The evidence on MCT oils (medium chain triglycerides) can't be applied to coconut oil as they are quite different substances.

The types of fat in them differ – coconut oil contains mainly lauric fatty acid and MCT oils contain mainly caprylic and capric fatty acids. While it is frequently (and mistakenly) claimed that lauric acid in coconut is a

medium-chain fatty acid, it acts like a long-chain fatty acid in every aspect of digestion and metabolism.

Furthermore, the triglycerides in MCT oils are a much smaller size than the triglycerides in coconut oil, and thus are handled quite differently by the body.

Q: What about traditional diets in Pacific countries where they ate a lot of coconut?

Pacific countries traditionally used very little coconut oil, but instead used coconut flesh and coconut milk/cream. This was consumed in the context of a simple diet with healthy foods like vegetables, fruit, and seafood alongside an active lifestyle. In some Pacific countries there were low rates of heart disease despite high coconut intake, but this wasn't the case in Sri Lanka where coconut intake was high, as was heart disease.

The type of fat consumed is only one part of a healthy dietary pattern - the remainder of the diet is very important in determining its combined effect on health.

Q: So what is recommended?

Occasional use of coconut oil is not a problem. However, it is not recommended as the main oil of choice. It is a better choice than butter, but based on current evidence it is not advisable to switch from unsaturated plant oils to coconut oil.