

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

The Superfood Powers of Coconut Oil

Again and again, modern science confirms the nutritional value of traditional whole foods, even those it once deemed unhealthy. Coconut oil is a prime example of a newly popular — yet very old-fashioned — functional food. Used for centuries in its native Southeast Asia and the Pacific Rim, coconut oil is making a comeback in Western countries that once shunned this ingredient for its high saturated fat content. Dr. Gravesen cuts past the low-fat rhetoric and reveals the amazing health benefits of coconut oil.



The Healthy Fat in Coconut Oil

The key to coconut oil's superfood status is *lauric acid*, a saturated fatty acid also plentiful in palm kernel oil and breast milk. Dairy fat from cows and goats also contains modest amounts of lauric acid. But at seven grams per tablespoon, coconut oil is the supreme source.

Once a part of the Western diet via coconut oil in baked goods and full-fat dairy products, lauric acid is scarce in modern meals — the demonization of saturated fats has pushed these natural foods off of our plates. We turned to highly processed vegetable oils in the middle of the twentieth century, eschewing traditional fats based on shaky evidence that blamed them for high cholesterol and cardiovascular disease.

Research published in well-respected

medical journals has called into question the relationship between saturated fats like lauric acid and the modern illnesses often attributed to them (*Am J Clin Nutr* 2010;91:535-46).

Dr. Gravesen is pleased that coconut oil is receiving more and more attention as a health-promoting fat due to its stable composition and powerful antioxidant qualities (*Indian J Pharmacol* 2010;42:142-5).

Lowers Cholesterol

Did you know that the right kind of saturated fat can actually improve cholesterol levels? Coconut oil contains antioxidants called polyphenols that prevent LDL (low density lipoprotein, or “bad”) cholesterol from oxidizing in artery walls. Coconut oil also boosts levels of HDL (high density lipopro-



tein, or “good”) cholesterol (*Clin Biochem* 2004;37:830-5).

This confirms what many cultures have known for generations about the importance of coconut oil for maintaining health. Studies in the 1980s showed the ill effects of removing this ingredient from the diets of healthy individuals who consumed it as a cultural tradition.

Find Out More About Nutrition and Wellness Research From Dr. Gravesen

If you are interested in nutrition and wellness research, you have come to the right place! Dr. Gravesen is committed to providing patients with the latest cutting-edge research.

We are focused on teaching our patients and community about this vital health information to help jump-start wellbeing and wellness. To this end, each week we present one hot-off-the-presses *Optimal Health University*® topic. To find out more about this revolutionary approach to patient education, or to suggest future topics, please call our office today!

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For example, when corn oil replaced coconut oil in the diets of young Sri Lankan men, their LDL/HDL ratios shot up 30 percent (*Nutr Rep Intl* 1989;40:4).

In another study, researchers gave three groups of women a low-fat diet, a diet high in coconut oil, or a diet high in monounsaturated fat. The group on the diet high in saturated fat from coconut oil had the greatest drop in blood levels of lipoprotein(a), a precursor of heart attack and stroke (*J of Nutr* 2003;133:3422-7).

Eat Fat, Lose Weight

Counterintuitive as it may seem, a diet rich in saturated fat from coconut oil is a powerful tool for weight loss. Its medium chain fatty acids (MCFAs) are particularly satiating, making it an effective appetite suppressant (*Curr Opin Clin Nutr Metab Care* 2003;6:629-34).

At the same time, the body turns this type of fat into energy quickly rather than storing it as body fat (*Am J Clin Nutr* 2000;72:905-11).

The smaller size of MCFAs — compared to the long-chain fatty acids in most vegetable and seed oil — makes them easier to digest and metabolize. Consuming coconut oil with a meal also raises body temperature, thus boosting metabolism and helping the body burn other fats (*Int J Obes Relat Metab Disord* 2000;24:1158-66).

Clinical trials support the notion that coconut oil kick-starts weight loss. A randomized, double-blind study put two groups of women on the same reduced-calorie diet with the addition of 30 milliliters of soybean oil or coconut oil daily.

After 12 weeks, the women who took coconut oil reduced their waistlines. On the other hand, women in the soybean oil group did not lose weight. Additionally, their cholesterol was higher than it was at the beginning of the experiment (*Lipids* 2009;44:593-601).

A Champion Disease-Fighter

Want to ward off infections naturally? Include coconut oil in your diet. The body converts the lauric acid in coconut oil into a potent antimicrobial agent called monolaurin. Scientists have discovered that monolaurin kills antibiotic-resistant bacteria and many viruses (*Mol Cell Biochem* 2005:272:29-34).

The real strength of monolaurin was evident when doctors added a coconut oil supplement to usual antibiotic treatment for children hospitalized with pneumonia. The children who received coconut oil for three days returned to normal respiration, temperature, and oxygen saturation faster than those who received only antibiotics, resulting in shorter hospitalizations (*Chest* 2008;134:139001).

Coconut oil also shows potential as an antifungal. In a lab test comparing it to the common antifungal medication fluconazole, coconut oil was on par with the drug for killing several strains of *Candida*, a group of pathogenic yeasts. The researchers recommended medical use of coconut oil to treat yeast infections that are increasingly drug-resistant (*J Med Food* 2007;10:384-7).

More Disease-Busting Benefits

Coconut oil's medium-chain fatty acids (MCFAs) show promise in the prevention and treatment of diabetes. In a trial on rats, those fed a diet high in MCFAs displayed less insulin resistance, a condition that can lead to type 2 diabetes (*Diabetes Metab Res Rev* 2009;25:185-94).

And in individuals who are already diabetic, this fat found plentifully in coconut oil helps sustain the cognitive function that usually declines during bouts of hypoglycemia (*Diabetes* 2009;58:1237-44).

Research indicates that coconut oil may also be beneficial as part of a special high-fat, low-carbohydrate diet for individuals with uncontrolled epi-

lepsy (*Pediatrics* 2007;119:535-43). The same diet has been used by some doctors to slow cancer growth (*J Am Diet Assoc* 1995;95:693-7).

Watch Out When Buying!

Select an organic, cold-pressed, extra-virgin coconut oil for the healthiest product with the least processing. Look for it at health food stores, ethnic markets or on the Internet. Avoid hydrogenated coconut oil as it contains trans fats. Extra-virgin coconut oil is solid at temperatures below 76°F (24°C) and has a light coconut aroma and flavor.



A heat-stable fat with a smoke point of 360°F (180°C), coconut oil is ideal for sautéing and frying. It is also a common ingredient in curries and other Southeast Asian dishes. Add it to smoothies for a health boost, or simply take it by the spoonful as a supplement. However you like your coconut oil, you will soon reap the health benefits of including this superfood in your diet.

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