

Re-thinking Coconut Oil

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Coconut oil has been misunderstood for more than a half a century. Prior to the 1950's it had been popular cooking oil as well as an ingredient in many food products.

The reason for its fall from grace include: 1) coconut oil supplies being cut off during World War II due to the Japanese occupation of the Philippines and the South Pacific Islands, 2) manufacturers developing alternative vegetable oil sources in response, 3) the end of the war having a great deal of money at stake to continue using these polyunsaturated vegetable oils, 4) the vegetable and soy oil industry condemning tropical oils to promote their own and, 4) the saturated fat panic; the fear that eating any saturated fat (i.e. coconut oil) created plaque in the arteries and put on weight.

With that, coconut oil's fate was sealed. It was sent to the dungeon.

Coconut oil has, however, a plethora of good qualities. For one, it is composed of medium chain fatty acids. The advantage of medium chain fatty acids is that they are smaller, permeate cell membranes easily, do not require special enzymes to be utilized by the body, are easily digested and convert directly into energy by the liver to help to stimulate the body's metabolism.

Early nutritional findings demonstrated the advantages of coconut oil. In the 1930s, Dr. Weston Price traveled throughout the South Pacific examining traditional diets and their effect on dental and overall health. He found those eating diets high in coconut products were healthy and trim despite the high fat concentration in their diet. His book "Nutrition and Physical Degeneration" used to be required reading for medical doctors.

In the 1940's farmers tried to use inexpensive coconut oil to feed their livestock. They thought this oil would fatten their cattle up. Contrarily, the coconut oil served to make the animals lean, active and hungry.

Vegetable oils, on the other hand, are comprised of long chain fatty acids, also known as long-chain triglycerides. The disadvantages of long-chain triglycerides when used out of balance in the diet are that they are difficult for the body to break down. These oils put more strain on the pancreas, liver and the digestive system.

Long chain fatty acids typically go into fat storage whereas medium chain fatty acids are burned for energy. For this reason, medium chain fatty acids such as coconut oil are now being used in sports for their enhancing of physical and athletic performance.

Coconut oil contains lauric acid, an important fatty acid found abundantly in mother's milk. Lauric acid has been recognized for its antiviral, antibacterial, and antiprotozoal (anti-parasite) properties. When consumed, lauric acid transforms into a substance called monolaurin, known for its immune strengthening qualities.

An example of the immune supportive role of lauric acid is in the case of 'enveloped' viruses. These viruses are particularly hard to eradicate due to their protective membrane. The envelope of these viruses, however, is a lipid membrane especially vulnerable to lauric acid and its derivative monolaurin.

Caprylic acid is another of coconut oil's antimicrobial components. Caprylic acid is often used as an anti-fungal agent in yeast overgrowth and candida issues.

You can buy caprylic acid as well as monolaurin in supplements - or you could get the preventative and therapeutic benefits through regular dietary use of a good quality coconut oil in your diet.

Research has also demonstrated the benefits of coconut oil on the activity of the thyroid gland. Coconut oil increases thyroid activity. This is good news for people with low thyroid function. By including two to three tablespoons of virgin coconut oil to their daily diet, many people have improved their thyroid health, have lost weight and increased their energy.

And, if no other point wins your attention, coconut oil has also been found to protect the liver from alcohol damage.

Coconut oil is naturally stable. It can be kept at room temperature for long periods of time without going rancid. It is excellent oil for sautéing as it is stable enough to resist heat-induced damage. As with any food group, quality is important. Unrefined, organic coconut oil is the best choice. Simple ways to include it in your diet is to use it in place of butter on toast or add to your smoothies and stir-frys.

A final note, coconut oil is also great for the skin. Use it topically for its health and anti-aging benefits.