

Is coconut oil good for you? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I've heard a lot of people talking about how coconut oil is supposed to be really good for you, but I also know that it has a lot of saturated fat. Is it actually healthy or not?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's definitely not a nutty idea to ask more about this oil! Unfortunately, though, the evidence on whether or not coconut oil is healthy is resoundingly... inconclusive. Despite its growing popularity (which may stem from excitement about its perceived health benefits), there is a lack of evidence to support a number of current health claims made about coconut oil (more on those in a bit). While consuming it in small quantities is unlikely to cause any adverse effect, it *is* composed of 90 percent saturated fat, is high in calories, and has a tendency to increase overall cholesterol levels. So, keeping consumption in moderation is recommended. Keep reading for more specifics on the nutritional value, related health claims, and potential benefits of this tropical oil!

First, the science behind coconut oil may help explain why only consuming moderate amounts is recommended. Coconut oil's saturated fat content is high compared to other fats and oils, such as butter's 64 percent and olive oil's 14 percent. High levels of saturated fat generally leads to an increase in "bad" LDL (low density lipoprotein) cholesterol levels, which in turn increase overall cholesterol and the risk of heart disease.

The recent trend in the consumption and use of coconut oil may actually stem from its ability to increase "good" HDL (high density lipoprotein) cholesterol relative to other saturated fats. This ability comes from one of its main components, lauric acid. A medium chain triglyceride (MCT), lauric acid results in fewer fat deposits in the liver. So, while lauric acid increases HDL levels, coconut oil's high saturated fat also increases LDL levels, thereby increasing overall cholesterol. The extent to which coconut oil's HDL boosting effect outweighs the increase in LDL has not been fully determined, but being high in calories and having the tendency to drive up overall cholesterol levels makes it less healthy relative to other oils. But, plant-based oils are more than just fats. They contain antioxidants and other substances, so their overall health effects may

extend beyond changes in LDL and HDL. Thus, more research may be needed to get a fuller picture of the overall health effects of consuming coconut oil.

So, given its inconclusive health benefits, why would people want to consume or use coconut oil? The demand for coconut oil is an example of the superfood trend. There's an abundance of blog posts, articles, and websites dedicated to the subject of coconut oil, making a number of health claims. These claims include suggestions that coconut oil may treat diseases (including Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, chronic fatigue, irritable bowel syndrome, and Crohn's disease — among others) help with weight loss, or act as an immune booster. Unfortunately, there's just not sufficient evidence to back up these specific claims. Emerging evidence may hold promise for some health concerns, which include:

- **Breast cancer treatment:** Some early evidence suggests that taking virgin (not refined) coconut oil taken during chemotherapy may improve some measures of quality of life for advanced breast cancer patients.
- **Newborn health:** There is research to indicate that massaging premature newborns with coconut oil may affect weight gain and growth. Similarly, rubbing coconut oil into newborns' skin daily for 28 days may help ward off infections.
- **Head lice:** Some research suggests that a blend of oils, including coconut oil, may be as effective at treating head lice in children as chemical insecticide sprays.
- **Dry skin:** Some evidence suggest that applying coconut oil to the skin twice daily may help with dry skin relief.

List adapted from [MedlinePlus](#) [2].

However, more research is necessary to further explore effectiveness for these and other conditions. So, what recognized benefits might coconut oil users reap now? There are some claims about coconut oil do hold up. As a treatment for eczema, for example, coconut oil has been shown to be more effective than mineral oil in easing symptoms in children. Additionally, coconut oil may help with moisturizing dry hair.

All this to say, it's wise to stick with evidence-backed claims and the idiom of "everything in moderation" when it comes to this oil. You may find coconut flavor delicious and there's no issue consuming coconut oil occasionally. Cooking with it may even be called for specifically, given recipes for certain dishes and flavors. However, it's recommended that you use coconut oil only sparingly, especially because it's unknown what effect coconut oil has on heart disease on a long-term basis.

Still hungry for more about healthy fats? Take a look at other Q&As in the [Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity](#) [3] archives for more information. You might also consider scheduling an appointment to talk with a registered dietician or a health care provider to learn more about the latest research and to see what role coconut oil can play for your personal health.

Coconuts are a tough nut to crack. Hope this cracked open the case on this inquiry for you!

Alice!

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