

Coconut oil – friend or foe?

It's been a tough time for coconut oil recently, with the American Heart Association (AHA) advising us to ditch it, since its high saturated fat content may increase cholesterol levels. This is bad news for those who thought they had finally found the perfect frying companion and holder-together for all those healthy bakes. Or is it? As is almost always the case with food types, it's just not that simple; I for one will keep using coconut oil and feeding it to my family. So here's what you need to know:

Yes to medium-chain fatty acids.

Coconut oil is high in saturated fats, but these are mainly medium-chain fatty acids, which are different from the fats found in, say, pork scratchings. They are metabolised more quickly and are even associated with weight loss. They may increase total cholesterol levels, but they do not increase levels of 'bad' LDL cholesterol or triglycerides, which is what counts. In Sri Lanka, coconut oil is often cited as a cause of the high heart disease rates – yet the *traditional* societies eating a *traditional* diet high in the oil have very low rates, and studies from the Philippines show that coconut oil is linked with healthy fat levels in the blood. In any case, cholesterol levels per se have only at most a weak link with heart disease rates, which suggests that the AHA advice is outdated and simplistic.

Coconut oil helps balance blood sugar. It is well established that balancing blood sugar is key to good heart health, since excess glucose and insulin damages blood vessels. Medium-chain fatty acids are linked with improved blood sugar levels, suggesting that by this means coconut oil actually has the potential to reduce cardiovascular disease risk.

Coconut oil is anti-inflammatory.

Avoiding inflammation is an important factor in heart health, as well as reducing other 'diseases of ageing' such as cancer and diabetes. Lauric acid, the main fat in coconut oil, has been found to reduce chronic inflammation.

Coconut oil for infections.

Lauric acid is anti-fungal, and research has shown it to be even more effective than a commonly used drug for treating candidiasis. The study authors concluded: "Coconut oil should be used in the treatment of fungal infections in view of emerging drug-resistant *Candida* species." Coconut oil, when tested on children, has also been found to be as effective as an anti-microbial drug in destroying a strain of *Streptococcus* bacteria that causes dental decay, and it can reduce inflammation and destroy bacteria in cases of dermatitis, common in young children.

Coconut oil can lower stress.

Medium-chain fatty acids have been found to have potent antidepressant action, and those found in coconut oil have also been shown to lower stress and improve antioxidant action in the brain. This suggests that coconut oil has real potential as a stress-lowering functional food.

Coconut oil for skin and hair.

Coconut oil is a popular hair and skin moisturiser, as it is easily absorbed and has excellent emollient properties. One study also found that it was the only oil that prevented protein loss from hair during washing.

How to use coconut oil.

It seems that coconut oil has many and varied health benefits, and that there is no reason to think that it can damage heart health. However, as with most foods, it is best eaten in moderation: a tablespoonful or two a day is enough, eaten as part of a healthy balanced diet that includes plenty of vegetables, lean proteins, and other healthy fats. Experts advise against eating coconut oil with sugar and refined carbohydrates, as it may amplify their harmful effects, and although you can eat it raw or cooked, avoid heating it so high that it reaches smoking point. ●

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