

Stop Worrying About **Coconut Oil**

Is this tropical fat an artery-clogging evil or a health-food sensation? Let's take a look at the claims and see if we can crack this nut! BY PEGGY HALL



Clever Uses for Coconut Oil

Cleanse
your skin
and remove
makeup

Use as a face
and body
moisturizer

Use a dab
instead of
hair gel

Spread on
toast in place
of butter

Stir into
oatmeal

Use in baked
goods (see our
exclusive
CE recipe,
opposite page!)

Drizzle over
steamed
veggies

Use in stir-fry
dishes or to
scramble eggs

Remember some years ago when we thought margarine was healthy? The yellow stuff in tubs was marketed as a better alternative to butter, but as it turns out, the hydrogenated oils and trans-fats it contains raise cholesterol and increase the risk for obesity and heart disease. Now we know that good old-fashioned butter (in moderation and organic whenever possible) is actually a much cleaner choice than chemically processed margarines.

Fast-forward a few years and the debate now turns to coconut oil and coconut butter (which is what the fat is called when it reaches a solid state at room temperature). "This tropical oil has been used for centuries as a staple in cooking and food preparation throughout Hawaii, the Philippines, Indonesia and India, where it is an important part of personal care and traditional medicine," says Yvonne Nienstadt, nutrition director at Rancho La Puerta Fitness Resort



and Spa in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico. Here in America, coconut oil and butter have recently been gaining popularity as the next “it” food. Coconut water drinks, for example, have been flooding the market in record numbers (*Clean Eating* loves O.N.E. coconut water!), and websites abound with testimonials from consumers using coconut oil for hair and skin care, stress relief and weight loss.

Try coconut oil, milk or butter in one of our clean recipes today. Coconut oil, which can be heated to high temperatures, is perfect for sautéing. Try coconut butter on whole grain toast and coconut milk in our Thai Coconut Curried Chicken on p. 84.



Coconut milk

Coconut oil

Coconut butter

Why the controversy?

“Coconut oil has gotten a bad reputation because it contains saturated fat,” explains Vermeulen M. Verhallo-Rowell, MD, author of *RX: Coconuts! The Perfect Health Nut* (PrimeZone Media, 2005). “But the saturated fat in coconut oil is different from the saturated fat in animal products.” That important but little-known fact is just one of the surprising truths about coconut oil. Let’s examine a few more.

Claim: Coconut oil contains cholesterol and trans-fats, and it raises cholesterol levels when eaten.

Facts: “Coconut oil is free of both cholesterol and trans-fats,” says Verhallo-Rowell. The confusion might have set in because coconut butter has a similar texture and appearance to butter and hydrogenated shortening, both of which do contain cholesterol and, in the case of shortening and margarine, trans-fats – but coconut butter contains neither. In fact, a study testing cholesterol ratio in women’s diets conducted by Akershus University College and the Institute for Nutrition Research at the University of Oslo in Norway has shown that coconut oil consumption actually improves cholesterol levels by raising HDL, or “good cholesterol.”

Claim: All saturated fats, including those in coconut oil, are unhealthy.

Facts: “The saturated fat in coconut oil is primarily lauric acid, which is also present in human breast milk,” says Verhallo-Rowell. Lauric acid is known to have antibacterial, antimicrobial and antiviral properties and appears to improve immune system function. Moreover, lauric acid is made up of medium-chain fatty acids, which are easily digested and more readily converted into energy than long-chain fatty acids, such as stearic acid, found in animal products.

Claim: Coconut oil speeds up the metabolism and promotes weight loss.

Facts: While research on the relationship between coconut oil and weight loss is still in the preliminary stage, a 2009 study by the Federal University of Alagoas in Brazil found that when 20 women ingested 30 ml (a bit more than 1 ounce) of coconut oil daily as part of a 12-week diet and exercise regimen, the participants showed a lowered body mass index (BMI), their waistlines decreased in size and their cholesterol levels saw improvements.

Another group of 20 women in a double-blind trial followed the same diet and exercise plan but were given 30 ml of soybean oil instead of coconut oil. They also lost weight, but their cholesterol profile worsened and they did not lose weight around their abdomens.

Bottom line:

- Moderate amounts of coconut oil (about 25 percent of your total daily fat) can be part of your daily fat intake without risk of elevated cholesterol levels or weight gain, according to Verhallo-Rowell. Just as with fruits and vegetables, strive for a variety of healthy sources when it comes to fats and oils.
- Look for virgin coconut oil (organic is preferred), which is made from fresh coconut meat, is processed minimally and has the distinct scent and flavor of coconuts. Most other commercial-grade coconut oils are made from copra, or dried coconut meat, and have a bland or bitter flavor and are often refined, bleached and deodorized.
- Coconut oil is a very stable fat and can withstand high heat without breaking down, says Nienstadt, making it an excellent choice for sautéing, stir-frying and baking your clean recipes. One to try: Vegetarian Hash on p. 48.



Coco-Cocoa Fantasy Fudge

Makes 16 servings.
Hands-on time: 5 minutes.
Total time: 25 minutes.

INGREDIENTS:

- ½ cup coconut butter
- ½ cup raw organic honey or pure maple syrup (or use a little of each to equal ½ cup)
- 1 tsp pure vanilla extract (optional)
- ½ cup cacao or cocoa powder (no sugar added)

INSTRUCTIONS:

ONE: Using a spoon, blend the coconut butter with the honey or syrup and mix well. (If the coconut butter is too hard, place it in an ovenproof container and set it in a 250°F oven for a few minutes until softened.) Add the vanilla extract, if desired. Stir in the cacao or cocoa powder. Mix until smooth.

TWO: Pour into an 8 x 8-inch pan and refrigerate until firm, about 20 minutes.

THREE: Cut into 16 pieces and keep cool.

NOTE: You can also use this mixture as frosting! Simply use it before refrigeration and it will spread easily.

Nutrients per serving:
Calories: 130, Total Fat: 9 g,
Sat. Fat: 7 g, Carbs: 11 g,
Fiber: 0 g, Sugars: 8 g, Protein: 1 g,
Sodium: 0 mg, Cholesterol: 0 mg