COCONUT OIL

If you keep up with health news, you've probably heard at least some news lately about coconut oil, including the most recent reports of the possibility of it being used as a cure for Alzheimer's disease. Many foods come in and out of "fashion" as being super-foods, foods so high in nutrition that we should actively add them into our daily, or at least weekly, regime. As consumers, we must decide which foods really are capable of improving our overall health, and which ones have simply become the next "it" food, often falling out of popularity as quickly as they fall in. So what is my opinion on coconut oil? Simply put, this saturated fat deserves its accolades. You should consider coconut oil, not only for its science-based nutritional value, but also for being a super food that will probably deal a strong blow to many of our pervasive diseases and an even stronger blow to how we have been analyzing and treating cardiovascular disease for more than fifty years.

I hope you caught the less than subtle claim that we now believe that a saturated fat will join the ranks of super foods like salmon and blueberries. You've been trained for decades that low saturated fat intake equals heart health, so how is it possible for this saturated fat to seemingly have the opposite effect, with populations that consume higher quantities having leaner physiques and lower incidence of heart disease and stroke? Is coconut oil different than other saturated fats, or have we been wrong about this type of fat as the culprit for cardiovascular disease altogether? The answer is, probably both.

Coconut oil has a couple of primary characteristics that differentiate it from other oils and make it more advantageous for us to consume. The first is the stbi1ity of the oil, which it gains from being saturated. Chemically speaking, a fatty structure defined as saturated is composed of a long chain of carbons with hydrogens attached. In every spot that a hydrogen could attach, one is attached (i.e., it is fully saturated with hydrogen molecules). Whereas in a polyunsaturated fat (such as vegetable oil), there are several places where no hydrogens are present, and instead the carbon molecules bond to each other, in what is called a double bond. The problem with these double bonds is that they are highly susceptible to heat, like in cooking. When they are exposed to heat, they become oxidized, which then leads to oxidative (free-radical) exposure when you consume them. Free radicals have been implicated in a myriad of diseases including cancer, heart disease, and stroke. Saturated fats, on the other hand, have no double bonds, are not volatile with heat, and thus, consumers of them have no free-radical exposure.

Coconut oil has a second, just as impressive characteristic. Structurally it belongs to a family known as medium chained triglycerides (MCTs). Fats that are MCTs are more readily made into a useable energy in the body, as opposed to other types of fats that are more easily stored...as fat. This metabolic advantage is likely why coconut oil is touted to actually promote weight loss and the building of lean tissue. The greater implication, however, is that MCTs also provide an alternate form of useable energy for the body, called ketones. You may have heard of ketones being detrimentally associated with famine and/or diabetes, but in small amounts in the brain, ketones can act as an effective energy source. It is this alternate fuel source that might turn out to be a key in treating Alzheimer's, which is thought perhaps to be partially caused by an inability of our brain cells to use glucose, which is usually their primary source of fuel. The MCTs in

coconut oil might also help the sufferers of other neurological illnesses such as Parkinson's disease, as well as be a possible link to the improvement of diabetic conditions.

If all of those benefits aren't enough for you, coconut oil is also highly nutritious, with a high content of lauric acid, which is anti-microbial and stimulating for the immune system. It has been used for hundreds of years in some cultures as a treatment for bacterial, viral, and fungal diseases. Small studies involving coconut oil run the gamut of diseases and dysfunctions, from proposed improvement in skin health to stimulation of the thyroid, most with positive outcomes.

As with many foods and nutrients, large-scale studies can be hard to come by, as these naturally occurring substances can't be patented (and therefore, no one wants to back the study). On the other hand, why not just try using coconut oil in your diet and see if you feel better? Coconut oil is generally solid or semi-solid at room temperature and so it will appear this way on your store shelf. In this form it can be used to replace margarines, butter, or shortening. It can also be melted to replace other liquid forms of oil for cooking. Many people use it in smoothies or other cold foods to add a little flavor. Keep in mind that monounsaturated fats, like olive oil, still hold their own with nutritional advantages and don't necessarily need to be replaced, so consider using these two oils interchangeably in your cooking.

It's easy to understand the advantages of coconut oil once you understand its structure and metabolism in the body, but just what are the larger implications for how we define "good fats" and "bad fats?" Since the 1960s, we have repeated the mantra that saturated fats promote heart disease, but we are now rethinking that theory. For one thing, not all saturated fats are the same, as noted above. Secondly, studies such as the recent Alzheimer's study have shown the benefit and function of cholesterol, which is vital in transporting this form of energy into the brain. For decades we've treated cholesterol as a primary cardiovascular disease culprit. In recent years, it has been thought that the lower the cholesterol, the better. Common sense leads us to question whether or not this should be our strategy for treating cholesterol, since we know cholesterol performs vital functions in the body and brain. It is likely advantageous to keep cholesterol from spiking to a high level, but it is probably just as important to have a lower level that we don't go below. Dementia and memory problems are not uncommonly reported as side effects of taking the very popular anti-cholesterol statin drugs, especially after extended use. It has recently been considered to include adding a warning of higher risk of dementia on statin labels.

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