

Coconut Craze

Walk into a local health store, or even your local grocery store and you are likely to see coconut oil. Coconut oil is one of the latest health trends. However, do you have all of the facts on coconut oil?

Coconut oil is a tropical oil made from the coconut fruit. Examples of other tropical oils include palm oil and palm kernel oil. There are many health claims about coconut oil ranging from the treatment of lice to treatment of Alzheimer's disease. However, not all claims related to coconut oil have been substantiated by research.

There are two main types of coconut oil used in cooking: virgin and refined. The first type is "virgin" coconut oil. Virgin coconut oil is extracted from the fruit of fresh mature coconuts without using chemicals or high temperatures. This type of coconut is considered "unrefined" and has a light, sweet, nutty flavor and aroma. It is often used for baking or sautéing at lower temperatures less than 350 degrees.

Refined coconut oil is made from dried coconut meat. It is often chemically bleached and deodorized. It lacks the sweet-nutty flavor of virgin coconut oil. Refined coconut is often used for baking or stir frying, or cooking at temperatures up to 425 degrees.

Sometimes food manufacturers use a version of coconut oil that has been processed further to produce partially hydrogenated coconut oil. Partially hydrogenated coconut oil contains *trans* fat. We should limit our consumption of *trans* fats. Check the nutrition facts panel for *trans* fats.

In regard to nutritional composition, coconut oil is considered a solid fat. It is 92% saturated fat, which is higher than butter. In fact, with the exception of palm kernel oil, all other common culinary oils, including canola, corn, safflower, soybean, flaxseed, and olive oil contain significantly less saturated fat than coconut oil. Coconut oil is a plant based food and therefore does not contain cholesterol.

Many people believe that coconut oil may have positive health benefits even though it is high in saturated fat. There is some evidence that coconut oil may have a neutral, or perhaps beneficial effect on cholesterol levels. However, while there is much "hype" around coconut oil, there is not adequate research regarding beneficial health benefits.

For now, it's best for individuals to follow recommendations from the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans regarding intakes of saturated and *trans* fats. The current recommendations state that Americans should consume less than 10% of calories from saturated fatty acids by replacing them with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids. In addition, individuals should keep *trans* fatty acid consumption as low as possible, especially by limiting foods that contain synthetic sources of *trans* fat, such as partially hydrogenated oils, and by limiting other solid fats.

The bottom line on coconut oil is that we should continue to limit intakes of saturated fat. There is not yet enough scientific evidence to indicate that coconut oil is "healthier" than other saturated fats. Individuals should avoid foods containing partially hydrogenated coconut oil. If you choose to cook with coconut oil, use virgin coconut oil, and use it sparingly.

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