Coconut Oil: Why it is so Good For You

by Lita Lee 12/14/2001

In this article, fats and oils are used interchangeably but in a strict sense, oil usually means liquid at room temperature and fat usually means solid at room temperature. However, coconut oil is solid at temperatures under 76 degrees F. So if you live at temperatures of 76 degrees F or more, coconut oil is liquid; if less than 76 degrees F, coconut oil is a fat.

Saturated fat - one that has a small degree of unsaturation or double bonds and tends to be more solid at room temperatures lower than 76 degrees F. Example: butter, coconut oil.

Monounsaturated oil - Contains some saturated fat but is largely oleic acid, a mono-unsaturated oil, which contains only one double bond. Example: Olive oil.

Polyunsaturated oils - poly means many, so this means that the fat has more than one double bond. Example: linoleic (omega-6) acid has two double bonds; alpha-linolenic (omega-3) acid has three double bonds; arachidonic acid has four double bonds.

The following information comes from the research of Ray Peat, Ph.D. and Mary G. Enig, Ph.D. References are given where applicable.

I recommend only three types of fats to my clients: extra virgin olive oil, organic or, preferably raw butter, and organic coconut oil. Most people understand the first two but cringe at the thought of eating coconut oil. Here's why I recommend coconut oil to everyone.

Coconut oil has been used as cooking oil for thousands of years. Popular cookbooks advertised it at the end of the 19th century. Then came the anti-saturated fat campaign and the promotion of polyunsaturated fats, such as flaxseed, canola, soybean, safflower, corn, and other seed and nut oils plus their partially hydrogenated counterparts (margarine, "I can't believe it's not butter", etc.) as the way to go. Indeed, saturated fats have been supposedly causally linked to high cholesterol and heart disease, multiple sclerosis and other bad health conditions. I don't know how anyone came to this conclusion, since it would be hard to find a person in America who has a high saturated fat diet. Why? Because nearly all commercial foods, including bread, crackers, chips, dips, many candies, zero cholesterol coffee creamers, all mayonnaise and all salad dressings, many pastries and ice creams, most dietetic (for weight loss or diabetes) "foods", many cereals, and nearly all crunchy snacks contain either polyunsaturated or partially hydrogenated fats (which contain some margarine and some of the unsaturated fat mixed together). These foods are often advertised as healthy "all vegetarian," "no-cholesterol" foods. Even the so-called saturated fat in commercial meat is partly unsaturated because most cows are fed corn and soybeans, both of which contain unsaturated oils.

Are there any people who live on saturated fats who are healthy? Yes! People who live in tropical climates and who have a diet high in coconut oil are healthier, have less heart disease, cancer, colon problems and so on, than unsaturated fat eaters. Two such groups of people include those from Melanesia and the Yucatan. These people are slightly hyperthyroid because of the thyroid stimulating effects of coconut oil plus a diet which includes protein (fish) and adequate fruit (stimulates thyroid function).

Can you eat unsaturated fats and get away with it? It all depends. The Eskimos ate cold-water fish, high in unsaturated oils BUT they also ate the whole animal, including the animal head, brain, thyroid glands, etc. and got the hormones from these glandulars. This caused them to become hyperthyroid, 25% higher than Americans, and they were classified as "pathologically hyperthyroid" by standard medical definition.

However, this so-called pathological condition allowed them to burn the unsaturated fats in the foods they ate. If you are not an Eskimo and eat mainly an unsaturated fat diet, you may be in trouble.

Now you know why I wonder how anyone can associate high cholesterol or saturated fats with heart disease, multiple sclerosis or any disease. Over the past 40 years, Americans have increased their consumption of unsaturated fats and partially hydrogenated fats and have decreased their consumption of saturated fatty acids and butter. Lauric acid, the major fatty acid in coconut oil and breast milk, is rarely present in the American diet. Yet saturated fats are still being called the health culprits while grocery stores abound with many kinds of seed and nut oils. Many have been told that if the unsaturated oil is unprocessed, it is safe. This is untrue. The harmful effects of unsaturated oil lie in their unsaturation, or the presence of many double bonds, which are very labile and easily peroxidized (become rancid inside the body). Details of this are given in the report on unsaturated oils.

Here is a summary of the health benefits of coconut oil. In general, coconut oil stimulates thyroid function and has wonderful antiseptic properties.

The Stability of Coconut Oil

Unsaturated oils in cooked foods become rancid in just a few hours, even in the refrigerator, one reason for the "stale" taste of leftovers. However, according to Peat, eating fresh unsaturated fats is even worse, because once inside the body, they will oxidize (turn rancid) very rapidly due to being heated and mixed with oxygen. Not so with coconut oil. Even after one year at room temperature, coconut oil shows no evidence of rancidity even though it contains 9% linoleic (omega - 6) polyunsaturated acid. Peat theorizes that coconut oil may have antioxidant properties, since the oil doesn't turn rancid and since it reduces our need for vitamin E, whereas unsaturated oils deplete vitamin E.

Thyroid-Stimulating, Anti-Aging Effects of Coconut Oil

Many researchers have reported that coconut oil lowers cholesterol (Blackburn et al 1988, Ahrens and colleagues, 1957). In 1981, Prior et al. showed that islanders with a diet high in coconut oil showed no harmful health effects. When these groups migrated to New Zealand and lowered their daily coconut oil intake, their total cholesterol and especially their LDL cholesterol - the so-called evil one - increased. The cholesterol-lowering properties of coconut oil are a direct result of its ability to stimulate thyroid function. In the presence of adequate thyroid hormone, cholesterol (specifically LDL-cholesterol) is converted by enzymatic processes to the vitally necessary anti-aging steroids, pregnenolone, progesterone and DHEA. These substances are required to help prevent heart disease, senility, obesity, cancer and other diseases associated with aging and chronic degenerative diseases.

Weight Loss Stimulating Properties of Coconut Oil - a Direct Result of Thyroid Stimulation

In the 1940's farmers tried coconut oil to fatten their animals but discovered that it made them lean and active and increased their appetite. Whoops! Then they tried an anti-thyroid drug. It made the livestock fat with less food but was found to be a carcinogen (cancer causing drug). In the late 1940's, it was found that the same anti-thyroid effect could be achieved by simply feeding animals soybeans and corn.

Anti-Cancer Effects of Coconut Oil

In 1987 Lim-Sylianco published a 50-year literature review showing the anti-cancer effects of coconut oil. In chemically induced cancers of the colon and breast, coconut oil was by far more protective than unsaturated oils. For example 32% of corn oil eaters got colon cancer whereas only 3% of coconut oil eaters got the cancer. Animals fed unsaturated oils had more tumors. This shows the thyroid-suppressive and hence, immuno-suppressive effect of unsaturated oils. (Cohen et al. 1986).

When Albert Schweitzer operated his clinic in tropical Africa, he said that it was many years before he saw a single case of cancer. He believed that the appearance of cancer was caused by introduction of the European diet to the Africans. Many studies since the 1920's have shown an association between consumption of unsaturated oils and the incidence of cancer.

Antimicrobial (Antiseptic) Effects of Coconut Oil

Coconut oil contains medium chain fatty acids such as lauric (C-12), caprylic (C-10) and myristic (C-14) acids. Of these three, coconut oil contains 40% lauric acid, which has the greater anti-viral activity of these three fatty acids. Lauric acid is so disease fighting that it is present in breast milk.

The body converts lauric acid to a fatty acid derivative (monolaurin), which is the substance that protects infants from viral, bacterial or protozoal infections. This was recognized and reported in 1966 (Jon Kabara). Work by Hierholzer and Kabara (1982) showed that monolaurin has virucidal effects on RNA and DNA viruses, which are surrounded by a lipid membrane. In addition to these RNA and DNA viruses, in 1978, Kabara and others reported that certain medium chain fatty acids, such as lauric acid have adverse effects on other pathogenic microorganisms, including bacteria, yeast and fungi. These fatty acids and their derivatives actually disrupt the lipid membranes of the organisms and thus inactivate them (Isaacs and Thormar 1991; Isaacs et al. 1992). This deactivation process also occurs in human and bovine milk when fatty acids are added to them (Isaacs et al. 1991).

References:

Peat, Raymond, Ph.D., Chapter 29, page 175. Copyright 1997 by Raymond Peat, P.O. Box 5764, Eugene, OR 97405. Price including S&H is $14.