

# The Healthy Benefits of Coconut Oil



Coconut oil is a healthy, naturally saturated oil and one of the most desirable of the natural fats to consume, especially in preference to unnatural and harmful partially hydrogenated or trans fats. Coconut oil has been consumed for thousands of years, including being used as a medicinal food in Ayurvedic medicine.

## Sources and Uses

Coconut oil comes from the fruit or seed of the coconut palm tree and is naturally pressed out of the fruit. This natural oil has a pale yellow coloration with a coconut odor and is highly stable, resistant to rancidity even with long periods of storage. The melting point of coconut oil is 24 to 25 °C (75-76 °F) and thus it can be used easily in both liquid or solid forms and is often used in cooking and baking. The high stability of coconut oil makes it popular for baking, and the candy and confection industry, as well as in non-food products such as soaps and cosmetics. People living in the tropics have traditionally used coconut oil as a moisturizer for centuries. Recently, the oil also has been shown to have skin antiseptic effects. Lauric acid, the main constituent of coconut oil, is used also in toothpastes and detergents.

## Components of Coconut Oil

A healthy diet contains mixtures of saturated, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Human breast milk contains about 45 to 50 % saturated fat, about 35% unsaturated and 15-20% polyunsaturated. Lauric acid and capric acid comprise about 20% of total saturated fatty acids found in breast milk. The high content of lauric acid in breast milk protects infants from invading viruses and bacteria and supports the immune system.

Saturated fat is needed by the body for proper cell membrane structure and function and for use as energy for the heart, muscles, and other organs. Coconut oil is high in saturated fat, containing about 50% lauric acid (C12). Other components of coconut oil include capric acid (C12), caprylic acid (C8), tocopherols and tocotrienols. Tocopherols and the related tocotrienols are potent anti-oxidants that can help maintain healthy cell structure and function, as well as protect the oil from oxidation which may cause rancidity.

Coconut oil contains about 65% saturated medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs) along with a small amount of mono- and polyunsaturated fatty acids. MCTs contain fatty acids with a chain length of 6 to 12 carbon atoms. MCTs are a source of readily-available energy, since they are metabolized more efficiently and more easily than longer chain triglycerides. MCTs have been used successively in malnourished individuals and in individuals suffering from malabsorption syndromes and in certain diseases of the lymphatic and intestinal system which may cause symptoms of gastrointestinal dysfunction, edema, and diarrhea.

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## **Benefits of Coconut Oil**

MCTs are directly utilized by the body and transported directly to the liver. Thus, they are not transported or deposited to tissues such as adipose (fat) tissue. Evidence suggests that increased consumption of MCTs increases burning of calories, increases satiety, helps decrease the amount of fat stored in adipose tissue and may help control body weight. Most Western or North American diets do not contain appreciable amounts of MCTs and thus supplementation may be beneficial.

The two main fatty acids found in coconut oil - lauric and capric acid -are MCTs with special properties. They exhibit anti-microbial activity and help combat pathogenic or disease-causing viruses, bacteria and other micro-organisms. Monolaurin is an anti-infective and anti-viral agent which the body makes from lauric acid. Coconut oil is the easiest way to consume lauric acid. Lauric acid has been studied for its anti-viral effect against many different viruses including the virus causing acquired immune deficiency disease (AIDS). The chain length of the fatty acid has been shown to be critical, as those fatty acids which are shorter or longer in length than lauric acid are less effective anti-viral agents, or may exhibit no anti-viral activity. The anti-viral activity of lauric acid is dose-dependent, with increasing effects seen with higher levels of consumption.

Coconut oil has been found to aid in the management of inflammatory disease, by increasing production of the anti-inflammatory compound, interleukin-10, and decreasing inflammatory mediators such as interleukin-6 and tumor necrosis factor. Chronic inflammation has become widespread in our society and contributes to the development of many chronic diseases as well as aging.

In summary, the health benefits of coconut oil may be achievable by increasing the daily dietary consumption of this healthy oil. This naturally-occurring healthy oil undergoes minimal processing without the use of harmful solvents and contains beneficial MCTs including lauric and capric acid. These important fatty acids provide energy and aid in metabolic processes including body fat regulation and weight control and exhibit significant anti-infective activity. As well, MCTs have been found to decrease inflammation. Increasing the consumption of coconut oil in our daily diet can help combat the excessive intake of unhealthy and harmful trans fatty acids and, along with other healthy oils, such as those containing essential fatty acids, can normalize the body's balance of saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated fat to maintain good health and achieve well-being.

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