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Does Coconut Oil Actually Work Any Magic on Eczema?

Sometimes it seems like there's nothing it can't do.



Most people can agree that coconut oil is seemingly a magic elixir for anything that ails you. But what about when it comes to eczema? Can this delicious-smelling liquid actually improve it? Or does using coconut oil for this purpose not really hold scientific water? (Uh, oil, as it were?)

You may have heard rumors that coconut oil can work wonders for eczema, specifically atopic dermatitis, the type of eczema that is most prevalent. (So, from here on out, when we say “eczema,” that’s what we mean.) Some

people think coconut oil can reduce eczema flare-ups, soothe inflammation, and lower the risk of infection if you have open sores or cracks in your skin.

Of course, when a product has amassed such a cult following, it can be tough to sort out what's legit and what's total B.S. That's why we roped in some experts for the real story on coconut oil and eczema.

Since eczema comes down to a problem with the top layer of skin, it makes sense that people might try to combat it by slathering something like coconut oil over the affected areas.

Eczema happens when your top layer of skin is essentially sleeping on the job. Normally that layer should lock in enough moisture to keep your skin hydrated and supple while also warding off bacteria, irritants, allergens, and other substances that can cause aggravation, according to the Mayo Clinic. If you have eczema, a gene variation prevents your top layer of skin from upholding this duty.

As a result, you can experience inflammation that causes eczema symptoms like serious dryness and itching, along with red or brown patches that are most likely to show up on your hands, feet, ankles, wrists, neck, upper chest, eyelids, and inside the bends of your elbows and knees, the Mayo Clinic says. You may also have small, raised bumps that itch, then weep fluid and crust over if you scratch them. That scratching can lead to tender, extra-irritated skin, and maybe even make you vulnerable to infection if you create any open wounds that may act as portals to pathogens.

The first piece of good news here is that people with eczema usually don't experience these symptoms all the time. Instead, they tend to have flares when they're exposed to triggers like sweat, stress, soaps, detergents, dust, and pollen, the Mayo Clinic says.

The other bit of good news is that experts have identified a lot of great eczema treatments to keep symptoms at bay. Coconut oil, though it shows promise, doesn't quite make the (official) cut.

There are some pretty well-established treatments for eczema, but coconut oil isn't one of them.

If your doctor diagnoses you with eczema, they'll probably recommend you try to prevent flare-ups (with methods like avoiding your triggers and using gentle skin-care products, among others) and using certain medications (like corticosteroid creams and anti-itch drugs) to cut back on inflammation and irritation when you do have a flare. Sometimes they'll have you use antibiotics if they're concerned you might get a skin infection.

If you have eczema, it's also essential to moisturize your skin two to three times a day with creams that are free of alcohols, scents, dyes, and other chemicals that can irritate your skin, according to the National Institute of Allergic and Infectious Diseases.

According to some experts, coconut oil *could* help you in the above endeavors, though not enough to replace conventional treatment methods.

That said, there is some research that shows coconut oil may be able to calm eczema in some cases.

Peter Lio, M.D., a clinical assistant professor of dermatology at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine who has researched the use of coconut oil for eczema, tells SELF that there's some data to back this up. The problem is that the research is not very robust.

Dr. Lio cites one randomized double-blind study published in the *International Journal of Dermatology* in 2014 that followed 117 children with eczema and had their parents apply either virgin coconut oil or mineral oil to their kids' skin for eight weeks. (Virgin coconut oil is the purest form; it has been processed in a specific way that introduces as few contaminants as possible and retains the oil's natural properties as best it can, Dr. Lio explains.) The researchers found that 47 percent of children in the coconut oil group had "moderate" improvement in their symptoms while 46 percent had an "excellent" response. In the mineral oil group, 34 percent had moderate improvement and 19 percent had excellent improvement.

Another double-blind controlled study published in the journal *Dermatitis* in 2008 analyzed 52 patients with eczema. Some used virgin coconut oil on their skin twice a day for four weeks, while others did the same with virgin olive oil. Overall, the people using the virgin coconut oil experienced a greater reduction in eczema severity. But there was another interesting finding, too. Twenty people in the coconut oil group had *Staphylococcus aureus* on their skin, a bacteria that can cause a painful and serious skin infection, while 12 people in the olive oil group did. At the end of the study, all but one of the people treated with coconut oil cleared *Staphylococcus aureus* from their skin, while only six people in the olive oil group could say the same. Remember, when you have eczema, your skin can't properly protect you from bacteria—so coconut oil's potential to reduce harmful bacteria may come in handy.

In both studies, researchers excluded participants who had used steroids or antibiotics within the two weeks before the trials began, and they also instructed the participants not to use any other medications or creams for their eczema during the study periods. Still, these studies are small and really just a start. More research is necessary to solidify this connection. However, Dr. Lio says, "These [studies] suggest that coconut oil has both moisturizing properties and some antibacterial properties, both of which appear to be helpful in the treatment of atopic dermatitis."

The mechanism behind why coconut oil could possibly help tame eczema isn't completely understood.

Some plant-based products, like tea tree oil, are thought to tamp down on certain microbes that can cause skin issues, Dr. Lio says. It may be that coconut oil can do this, too, potentially reducing how intensely microorganisms like bacteria can irritate your skin (or how likely you may be to get an infection from said bacteria), he says. However, he adds, it's all speculation at this point.

As for the claims that coconut oil is straight-up an excellent moisturizer for eczema, it's a little more complicated than that. Moisturizers fall into three groups: humectants (they draw water into your skin), occlusives (they coat your skin's surface and reduce water loss), and emollients (they soften your skin). Oils fall into the occlusive and emollient categories, meaning they will sit on top of your skin and work to prevent moisture from escaping, hence Dr. Lio's statement that coconut oil seems to have moisturizing *properties*. But, since oil isn't a humectant, it doesn't actually deliver moisture to your parched skin in the way other moisturizers do. That means coconut oil would, in theory, work best when layered on top of a humectant that will actually draw moisture into your skin's surface, Dr. Lio explains. Look for eczema-friendly products that are specifically meant to moisturize your skin.

Also, heads up: Even if you're fully on the coconut oil bandwagon, it can be a mess to apply. Coconut oil can become solid at cooler temperatures, but when your hands warm it up before applying it to your skin, it'll get runny in no time, Temitayo Ogunleye, M.D., assistant professor of clinical dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine, tells SELF. She recommends that people use thicker moisturizers instead (especially since they're generally known to provide more hydration, anyway).

There's also the potential issue with food allergies. People with eczema are more likely than others to have them, so rubbing coconut oil onto your skin when you have eczema could just be setting yourself up for an allergic reaction, Dr. Ogunleye says. Of course, you probably already know if you're allergic to nuts or to coconut oil specifically, but food allergies can develop in adults, so it's still worth keeping in mind.

Finally, if you're acne-prone, you should probably take a pass on coconut oil. It's comedogenic, which means it could block your pores and cause a breakout, Gary Goldenberg, M.D., assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, tells SELF. Even if your skin doesn't have a natural inclination toward acne, having eczema may make your skin more sensitive, so you should still proceed with caution. Consider patch testing by applying a bit of coconut oil to your inner arm for a week or so to gauge your skin's reaction before you lube up on larger swaths of your body.

As is the case with many health-related issues, whether or not coconut oil will help your eczema seems to be pretty individual.

If you don't have an allergy to coconut oil, your skin isn't acne-prone, and you're not expecting miracles, coconut oil may be a good addition to your eczema-fighting arsenal. But that doesn't mean you should toss all the treatments your dermatologist gave you in favor of the stuff. Instead, continue using whatever your dermatologist has deemed the best treatment for your eczema, then introduce coconut oil into the mix slowly and with patience. If you're at all unsure about whether or not it's a fit for you, as always, your doctor is the best person to turn to with questions.