

# Seriously, Though, Is Coconut Oil Healthy or Not?

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Coconut oil isn't new to the world by any means, but over the past decade or so, it's certainly become a major health trend. Folks are using it for practically everything, from mouthwash (in the form of oil pulling) to skin moisturizer, to you know, as a cooking oil. The uses and health benefits of coconut oil can seem endless and are widely touted (and occasionally, roundly mocked). Coconut oil has undergone a huge shift in public perception over the past 30 years too, from being widely perceived as one of the bad "tropical oils" of the 1980s to now being seen as a total health wonder: Seventy-two percent of Americans think coconut oil is a healthy food.

But earlier this year, the American Heart Association released a report advising against the use of coconut oil. This report caught like wildfire, sparking headlines like "Coconut oil isn't healthy. It's never been healthy." Of course, this contradicted everything we've come to think about coconut oil in the past few years. So what's the actual deal? Is this stuff good for you or not? We did a bunch of research—and spoke with experts in the field—to find out.

## The research doesn't all point the same way.

In the early 2000s, studies published by researchers at Columbia University boosted coconut oil's reputation as a healthy food. These studies indicated that medium chain fatty acids (which are found in coconut oil) can help adults burn fat. A 2015 study also indicates that coconut oil boosts your HDL, or "good cholesterol." And another study suggests that coconut oil might promote weight loss in obese women.

The claims about coconut oil's health benefits are many, including the idea that it helps decrease the chance of cardiovascular disease. But at least one review of relevant studies determined that research doesn't really support the popular idea that coconut oil reduces the risk of CVD.

"Recent study results are conflicting," says Susan Stalte, R.D. She takes issue with many of the claims being made about coconut oil's health benefits because of the lack of long-term research. "While coconut oil does contain lauric acid (an MCT, or medium chain triglyceride), there's not enough of it in normally consumed amounts to encourage sustainable weight loss," she says. "A few very small studies conducted years back found that MCT oil may help with weight loss, but these studies are outdated, and there's no recent evidence-based research out there yet to support that coconut oil prevents diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, or anything else."

## How you think about saturated fat determines how you think about coconut oil.

Let's turn our attention to the idea of saturated fat—and what it means for using coconut oil in our food. The American Heart Association recommends 13 grams or less of saturated fat each day. It points to evidence that

saturated fat can raise bad cholesterol, putting people at higher risk for heart disease (which, yes, definitely directly contradicts the idea that it could decrease the chance of cardiovascular disease, as mentioned earlier).

And coconut oil is indeed high in saturated fat. It contains 12 grams of saturated fat in each tablespoon, which is much higher than olive oil (2 grams) and canola oil (1 gram).

According to the USDA nutrient database, coconut oil is about 82 percent saturated fat, whereas butter is about 50 percent, and beef fat (tallow) is also about 50 percent saturated fat. Saturated fat has been well demonstrated to raise 'bad' LDL cholesterol levels, which increases the risk of heart disease. So looking at it from this perspective, coconut oil is worse for our hearts than many other cooking fats.

There are definitely other nutrition facts to consider, however, especially if you don't necessarily believe high-fat diets are bad for you. The AHA appears to suggest that low-fat diets are inherently good, but not everyone agrees with this—high-fat diets seem to work for some people more than others.

## So is coconut oil OK to use?

Sure, Stalte says. Coconut oil has a long shelf life, and it adds a deep coconut flavor to food. "I use coconut oil when making eggs and when roasting veggies," she says.

Just use it sparingly. "Nutrition guidelines still recommend keeping saturated fat to 7 to 10 percent of total daily calories or less," she says. "At least until more is known, you're better off using coconut oil in moderation, and getting the bulk of the fats you eat and cook with from heart-smart unsaturated sources, such as olive oil and fatty fish."

The oil does appear to have other benefits when applied topically, however. Because it's anti-fungal and anti-microbial, it could make a good post-shave cream or moisturizer, provided that you have the right skin type. "Coconut oil is fine for patients with dry or sensitive skin and even those patients with eczema (provided they aren't allergic to it)," says dermatologist **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**

As for oil pulling, there's no strong evidence to support the idea that this process is good for you. However, a few small studies indicate that oil pulling, either with sesame or coconut oil, can reduce plaque. So while the jury's still out, there's a bit of evidence to support the idea that this traditional Ayurvedic remedy may have scientific merit.

## So, yeah, coconut oil isn't exactly a magical cure-all that will fix problems with your skin, heart, and relationships.

Whether you take the AHA's advice or not, don't buy into the fad that coconut oil is a miracle food, Stalte says. "If you're really trying to eat healthier, it will involve more than taking or leaving coconut oil," she says. "One single food or supplement will not lead to a night-and-day wellness difference."

Stalte offers these tips: "Cut out the processed foods and schedule a few gym days per week on your calendar. Incorporate a tiny bit of coconut oil to your nutrition routine only if you enjoy the taste or if you're seeking a highly heat-resistant option to cook with so that it doesn't break down into harmful chemicals, not if you're expecting serious benefits and looking for a quick weight-loss fix."