

# Coconut oil- a natural cure

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From villain to winner, the journey of coconut oil in the health food world has been an exciting one. Once called an evil unsaturated fat, which is dangerous for people who are affected by heart problems, high blood pressure, and thyroid issues, has now become a healing and nourishing substance spiraling upwards in popularity. Of all the ill effects of coconut oil, the much celebrated was the saturated fat myth that even till today runs unbridled spreading misconceptions. It was in the late 1970's that people were introduced to the myth about saturated fats making people fat. Health professionals across the world were advising the general public to stay away from saturated fat rich foods such as butter, egg yolk, animal fats and coconut oil. It was said during those times that coconut oil is unhealthy and contribute to heart disease. But, off late research studies have proved that it is not true. In fact, coconut oil is actually a heart-healthy oil that can keep your body running smoother in a few different ways.

## Heart-Healthy Oil

Earlier, with the discovery of cholesterol and its link to heart health, all saturated fats (solid at room temperature) were deemed bad. Thus, coconut oil received a bad reputation, even though it has unique health giving properties. Scientists have recently discovered that even though coconut oil is predominantly a saturated fat, eating it on a regular basis can reduce your chances of suffering from ischemic heart complaints.

All fats are made up of fatty acids. The size of each fatty acid depends on how many carbon atoms

with attached hydrogen atoms are linked together. Some are made up of a short chain of fatty acids (SCFA), others of medium chain of fatty acids (MCFA) and others still of long chain fatty acids (LCFA). Co-

conut oil is composed of a group of unique MCFAs, which can protect you from getting heart attack or suffering from stroke.

A study published in the medical journal *Tropical and Geographical Medicine* found that coronary heart disease, the world's number one cause of death, is virtually unknown in a coconut consuming population of Sri Lanka. The study examined 207 adults in the age group of 20-83 years. A detailed medical history was taken of each subject, which included level of daily physical activity, dietary and smoking habits, and any adverse symptoms, with special emphasis on the presence of cardiac chest pain. A complete physical examination and blood analysis was performed with special attention to the cardiovascular system. None of the subjects reported any heart related symptoms such as angina (chest pain) or myocardial infarction (heart attack). When checked with an electrocardiogram, there were no features of heart disease found in any of the subjects. Despite the fact that 39 per cent of the men smoked, only



3.8 per cent showed elevated blood pressure, which is much lower than in the Sinhalese population. Blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels were average and the HDL cholesterol (the good cholesterol which protects against heart disease) was higher. Coconut consumption is known to raise HDL cholesterol, so this may have HDL levels. In summary, there was absolutely no evidence of heart problems among this population.

"About half of the saturated fat in coconut oil is the 12-carbon variety, called lauric acid. That is a higher percentage than in most other oils, and is probably responsible for the unusual HDL effects of coconut oil," opines Walter C. Willett, M.D., Harvard School of Public Health, Department of Nutrition.

Saturated fat has been wrongfully vilified as the cause of high cholesterol and heart disease for the last 60 years, when in fact the converse was true all along. Dr. Florentino B. Herrera in her research article titled *Coconut oil consumption and coronary heart disease*, published in the

Philippine Journal of Internal Medicine. 1992 May-Jun;30(3):165-171, says that "All available population studies show that dietary coconut oil does not lead to high serum cholesterol nor to high coronary heart disease mortality or morbidity rate." Multiple studies on Pacific Island population who get 30-60 per cent of their total caloric intake from fully saturated coconut oil have all shown nearly non-existent rates of cardiovascular disease.

"The natural, non-hydrogenated coconut oil tends to increase HDL cholesterol that helps protect against heart diseases and improve the cholesterol profile. Total blood cholesterol, which includes both HDL and LDL cholesterol, is a very inaccurate indicator of heart disease risk. A much more accurate way to judge heart disease risk is to separate the two types of cholesterol. Therefore, the ratio of the bad to good cholesterol (LDL/HDL) is universally recognized as a far more accurate indicator of heart disease risk. Many studies suggest that because of coconut oil's tendency to increase HDL, the cholesterol ratio improves and thus decreases risk of heart disease," says Dr. C. S. Ullas, MD, DM, Senior Consultant Interventional Cardiologist.

"Coconut is sweet, cooling and increases 'kapha'. According to Ayurveda, when the body is suffering from hyper acidity due to high toxin level (Pitta dosha condition), coconut can help to detoxify and purify the digestive system. It is a cooling and heavy fruit that is mostly suitable for Pitta and Vata dosha. Since it is in the sheetha veeryam, coconut oil is good for fighting neuro, cardiac, diuretic and blood-related diseases. It eliminates toxicity and tiredness," explains Dr. A. M. Anwar, CMD and Chief Physician of Punarnava Ayurveda Hospital.

The water of a single coconut contains sufficient vitamin C to meet

the daily requirements of body. It acts as an anti-dote to the side-effects of medicines and is used in healing a number of ailments such as fever, headache, diarrhea and dysentery.

"The flower of coconut is good for treating rectal bleeding and gastric issues. Thengin Pookkula Lehyam is usually used by ladies undergoing post natal care. This lehyam is supposed to help in reducing back pain associated with delivery and help in regaining health. It also helps increase breast milk. Combination of asafetida and coconut water is really helpful for fighting gastric related issues.

Naleekera Lavanam helps digestion and fights liver diseases. Naleekera Khandam is used for curing acidity-related issues and Eladi Keram and Nalpamaradi Keram for skin-related issues," says Dr. Anwar. The doctor also gives a special tip, to fight cracked heels and dry skin, exclusive for the readers of Indian Coconut Journal: Make a small hole in the coconut and put a handful of brown rice into the shell. Do not drain the water. Keep it intact for two days till the rice gets puffed up. Grind it into a thick paste and apply it on your skin. Dr. Anwar of Punarnava Hospital says that it is a natural and wonderful healing drug.

### Is coconut oil a thyroid cure?

Though it cannot be called as a thyroid cure by itself, coconut oil helps people with thyroid function by stimulating metabolism and boosting energy. Coconut oil has a direct effect in suppressing inflammation and repairing tissue, and it may also contribute by inhibiting harmful intestinal microorganisms that cause chronic inflammation. Lauric acid, its metabolite monolaurin and other fatty acids in coconut oil are known to protect against infection from bacteria, viruses, yeast, fungi and parasites. Coconut oil inactivates undesirable microbes and the studies have also proven that it does not have any

negative effect on beneficial gut bacteria. "Coconut oil can also raise basal body temperatures while increasing metabolism, which is good for people who suffer from low thyroid function," says Dr. Aparna, Senior Consultant Physician, Endocrinologist & Diabetologist.

Monolaurin serves to defend against viruses, bacteria and other potentially harmful pathogens. In 1998 researchers from McGill university found that MCT's actually boost metabolism and increase the speed at which the body burns up energy. This is because the energy needed by the body to burn up MCT's is greater than the amount of energy they provide. They reported that coconut oil has a 'thermogenic' effect and as such may be considered a potential weight loss aid. The researches show that coconut oil is burned off three times faster than other common fats and boosts energy expenditure and post meal metabolism. Regular consumption of coconut oil has the power to ramp up your fat-burning potential – especially for losing stubborn belly fat – improving digestion and regulating appetite. The MCTs in coconut oil assist the body in the conversion of cholesterol in the blood stream into the sterone pregnenolone, one of the main precursors for the human body's production of hormones, thereby promoting the production of healthy hormones which improve digestion and reduce stress and anxiety.

Recent discovery is that coconut oil may even serve as a natural treatment for Alzheimer's disease, as MCTs are also a primary source of ketone bodies, which act as an alternate source of brain fuel that can help prevent the brain atrophy associated with dementia.

It is not surprising that the nut from the tree of life would deliver such incredible health benefits. Add coconut oil to your daily diet for your better health.