break out of your shell

It seems you can’t pick up a health magazine lately without reading about the benefits of coconut. The stuff is everywhere! So what’s the deal? How did this formerly forbidden food—it contains a fair amount of saturated fat—redeem its reputation and become the latest darling of the superfood set?

Good Fat
The good news about coconut actually started back in the 1960s and 70s with research from the Pacific Islands and Asia. A long-term, multidisciplinary study was set up to examine the health of the people living in the small, idyllic coconut-eating islands of Tokelau and Pukapuka. What researchers found was astonishing. Despite eating a “high-fat” diet (35 to 60 percent of the islanders’ calories were from fat, mostly saturated fat from coconuts), the Pukapuka and Tokelau islanders were virtually free of atherosclerosis, heart disease, and colon cancer. Digestive problems were rare. The islanders were lean and healthy. There were no signs of kidney disease; high blood cholesterol was unknown.

Actually, that’s not as surprising as it sounds. The saturated fat in coconut is nothing to fear. It’s a type of saturated fat called MCT—medium-chain triglycerides—that the body likes to use for energy, rather than store as fat.

Bug Buster
MCTs have antiviral and antimicrobial properties. Specifically, both coconut and coconut oil contain a fatty acid called lauric acid, which has been found to be quite effective in fighting a number of bacteria. In the human body, lauric acid is formed into monolaurin, which is basically a bug killer: it’s antiviral and antibacterial. Mary Enig, PhD, one of the premiere lipid biochemists in the United States, has written about the antiviral and antibacterial effects of lauric acid in particular, and of coconut in general, documenting its effects on a host of microbes, and quoting studies showing its immune-enhancing effects.

Another 6 to 7 percent of the fatty acids in coconut fit are an MCT called capric acid, which is formed into monocaprin in the human body. Monocaprin has also been shown to have antiviral effects and is being tested for possible antiviral effects against herpes and antibacterial effects against chlamydia.

This makes coconut and coconut oil very effective for supporting the immune system. “Because of its antiviral and antimicrobial properties, people with HIV and AIDS have used coconut and coconut oil to help build immune support,” says Esther Blum, MS, RD, CNS, author of Eat, Drink and Be Gorgeous!

A Safer Way to Cook
The other thing about coconut oil is that it’s incredibly stable. “You can heat it to high temperatures and it doesn’t break down and change its chemical composition and create trans fats or other undesirable compounds,” explains Blum. It imparts a nice taste while adding no more calories than any other oil or butter. (You can also mix a little butter and a little coconut oil together for anything that requires “greasing” the pan, stir-frying, or sautéing.)

“Coconut oil has a neutral effect on blood cholesterol, even in situations where coconut oil is the sole source of fat,” said George Blackburn, MD, a Harvard Medical School researcher testifying at a congressional hearing about tropical oils back in 1988. “These (tropical) oils have been consumed as a substantial part of the diet of many groups for thousands of years with absolutely no evidence of any harmful effects to the populations consuming them,” says Enig. Even C. Everett Koop, MD, former surgeon general of the United States, called the tropical-oil scare “foolishness.”

Nutritional Powerhouse
In his seminal book, A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs of Eastern and Central North America, renowned herbalist James Duke wrote that coconut and coconut oil are used as folk remedies to treat more than 35 ailments, from abscesses to wounds. And it’s well-known that the absorption of calcium, magnesium, and amino acids has been found to increase when infants are fed a diet using coconut oil. Coconut oil also

By Jonny Bowden, PhD, CNS

DID YOU KNOW?
Coconut water is low in calories, high in electrolytes, and chock-full of antioxidants and potassium.
has substantial antioxidant power.

Populations that consume coconuts as a major part of their diets are rarely troubled by osteoporosis. One-half cup of shredded coconut meat has almost 4 grams of fiber, 142 milligrams of potassium, 13 milligrams of magnesium, less than 3 grams of sugar, and—most important—13 grams of fat, which is nothing to fear.

How to Use It

According to Blum, it's simple to incorporate coconut into the diet. "You can pour the oil over salads or rub chicken with it before baking," she says. "It's also great to use as a cooking oil for sautéing." (I use my favorite—Barlean's Organic Coconut Oil—almost every day when I stir-fry vegetables or make scrambled eggs.) Blum is also fond of using dried, unsweetened coconut flakes. "Eat them on oatmeal, or flake fish with it," she advises.

You can also buy coconut water, milk, and chopped coconut meat in many health food stores. "And of course, for a special treat, there are coconut macaroons," Blum says. (Try Jennies Coconut Macaroons, an all-natural goodie.) But Blum's favorite? "Eating some of the raw coconut meat straight up with some dark chocolate on the side. It's so pure and delicious."

Product Examples (from left)

Jarrow Formulas Coconut Oil is certified-organic, expeller-pressed, and ideal for cooking.

Garden of Life Coconut Oil contains a subtle, delicious coconut aroma and flavor.

Barlean's Coconut Oil is harvested at the peak of its nutritional value and cold-pressed fresh.

Artisana Organic Raw Coconut Oil can be used in place of butter, and is great for cooking, frying, and baking.