Coconuts and coconut oil have been a source of food and medicine throughout the world for centuries. Research has shown that they may reduce heart disease risk, fight viruses and bacteria, and promote strong bones and teeth. A colorless oil extracted from the flesh, coconut oil also has healing benefits when used on the hair and skin.

Despite research highlighting the benefits of coconut oil, the US Food and Drug Administration recommends avoiding it because it is high in saturated fat. Why has this seemingly healthful fat been so misunderstood and maligned?

"There are a lot of misconceptions about saturated fats," explains Bruce Fife, CN, ND, director of the Coconut Research Center and author of The Coconut Oil Miracle and Cooking with Coconut Flour. "There are a number of different saturated fats and the ones found in coconut oil are actually quite healthy."

How the Oil Heals
In general, coconuts contain several essential nutrients. The meat has about 9g of fiber per cup and as much protein as green beans and carrots, as well as folic acid, calcium, iron and vitamins B1, B6, C and E.

Coconut oil contains compounds responsible for many of its unique benefits. The oil boasts lauric acid (also found in mother’s milk), which helps kill harmful bacteria and viruses. For example, taking the oil internally and applying it externally has been shown to reduce rosacea symptoms.

Caprylic acid, also in coconut oil, is thought to be a potent antifungal agent and may hold promise for treating athlete’s foot, candida and other fungal conditions. Both lauric and caprylic acids are available in supplement form.

One of the most exciting aspects to coconut oil is its possible fat-burning power. The credit goes to the oil’s concentration of medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs), which appear to be digested differently from other fats. "Instead of being packed away into fat cells, MCTs are used to produce energy. This boost in energy production stimulates metabolism," explains Fife, who suggests coconut oil for its hunger-satisfying, energy-boosting and blood sugar-regulating effects.

Tropical Health and Beauty Tonic
Coconut oil has a rich texture that does not require the addition of harsh chemicals to boost its effectiveness in beauty products, such as lotions and shampoos. Research has found that it helps maintain hair proteins and penetrates the hair shaft, protecting against damage. For a deep conditioning, massage a few tablespoons of coconut oil into your hair and leave overnight.
When applied to the skin, coconut oil has also been shown to reduce inflammation, prevent blemishes/acetone and treat eczema, psoriasis, rosacea and rashes. It can also be used as a natural tanning oil.

Coconut oil can be substituted for butter, shortening, margarine and vegetable oil in recipes ranging from cookies to stir-fried vegetables. "A good quality virgin coconut oil will have a mild coconut aroma and flavor but will not make a huge difference in how food tastes," says Fife. It's extremely stable when heated and doesn't produce toxic "by-products."

To maximize the benefits, use in place of other vegetable oils when cooking. Worried about cholesterol? Fife says the oil can actually improve your cholesterol ratio by increasing HDL ("good") cholesterol.

Garden of Life EXTRA VIRGIN COCONUT OIL, which may help maintain healthy cholesterol levels, can be used in place of butter, and for cooking, frying and baking.

The coconut milk and oil used in Alba Botanica COCONUT MILK FACIAL WASH helps remove impurities without drying sensitive skin. The silky COCONUT MILK BODY CREAM is a new addition to the line.

Within two hours of chopping the coconuts, Nutiva cold-presses the oil for its FRESH ORGANIC EXTRA VIRGIN COCONUT OIL.

Monoi Tiaré Tahiti COCONUT OIL SOAP in sandalwood offers the benefits of coconut oil in a convenient and fragrant bar soap.

Burt's Bees COCONUT FOOT CREAM contains super-saturated coconut oil and other natural emollient ingredients, including a hint of peppermint.
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