



# Is Coconut Oil Healthy or Hazardous?

By Alona Pulde, MD and Matthew Lederman, MD  
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We are not quite sure why people think there is something magically healthy about coconut oil. We think it is because it tastes good, and therefore the misinformation is easier to swallow. For several years now, coconut oil has been marketed as the new wonder oil, a cure-all with health benefits ranging from antimicrobial properties (such as fighting viruses and bacteria, including HIV), to fighting cancer (by supporting our immune system), to reducing heart disease (by reducing cholesterol and benefiting our arteries), to promoting weight loss, to treating hyperthyroidism, to many other things. Its uses are also varied—it's a cooking and baking oil, an ingredient in many packaged foods, and a component used in biodiesel fuel, soaps, and skin products.

**So what's the scoop?** Well, it is true that coconut oil contains some medium-chain fatty acids called MCFAs, which are less readily absorbed compared to longer-chain fatty acids. And these MCFAs have been shown to have less of an effect on LDL, bad cholesterol. But is that not similar to saying that burning your hand with a 300-degree flame has less of an effect on your skin than burning your hand with a 400-degree flame? **Oil and fat** are oil and fat.

That being said, we have read that MCFAs are absorbed directly into the liver, and as a result, have the potential [to promote] weight loss. Even if true—this was only theoretical in the study—this reductionist view misses the point that people don't eat MCFAs. Rather, they eat coconut oil, and half the saturated fat in coconut oil is not MCFAs. At over 90% saturated fat, taking away the portion of MCFAs in coconut oil—which still requires us to make the huge assumption that MCFAs are all good and can't be negated—then you are still left with 45% of the saturated fat. So even subtracting all of the theoretical goodness of MCFAs from the total saturated fat content, coconut oil is still worse than lard, which is only 43% saturated fat. And we all know that lard is not a health food.

In many cases, the minimal amount of beneficial MCFAs in coconut oil are isolated and removed from the oil to be used medicinally or in beauty products. So

many people are risking their hearts and their lives and not even getting the little theoretical benefit they thought they were getting.

Yes, it is true that some of these MCFAs, like lauric acid and capric acid, have been shown to have antifungal and antiviral properties, but we don't eat foods because of their antimicrobial properties. We eat foods to provide healthy fuels, which as a result strengthen our immune system, which then fights microbes. Now, food doesn't fight infection; rather, our immune system does. With that argument we could recommend alcohol as a health food because alcohol kills some microbes.

More importantly, we shouldn't approve of a food just because one part of it has a specific property we like. This reductionist view is sort of like saying cigarettes are great because they have found some antioxidants in the tobacco. The take-home message is that the whole food serves no purpose and does pose a serious risk. There are no omega-3 fats, the essential fats people actually need, in coconut oil. And furthermore, if people on a no-added-oil, low-fat, plant-based diet added coconut oil to their diets, the fat load on their vessels would cause serious damage. Inflammation increases and blood vessel flow decreases when exposed to any fat, including coconut oil. Overall, health takes a beating.

1 Tablespoon of coconut oil	
Calories (mg)	116
Total Fat (g)	14
Saturated Fat (g)	12
Monosaturated Fat (g)	0.8
Polyunsaturated Fat (g)	0.2
Carbohydrates	0
Protein	0
Vitamins A, C, E, B6, B12	0
Vitamin K (microgram)	0.1 (1 romain leaf = 30mcg)
Iron	0
Magnesium	0
Potassium	0
Sodium	0
Zinc	0

When looking at the whole package, the numbers just

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don't lie. Take a look at the nutritional content of one tablespoon of coconut oil. There are 116 calories, which all come from fat, which is easily stored as fat on your body. The mostly saturated fat is 12 grams, half of which are not MCFAs, this theoretically good medium-chain fatty acid. There are no carbohydrates and no protein; there are no vitamins except 0.1 micrograms of vitamin K. And just so you get this in perspective, one romaine leaf has 30 micrograms of vitamin K.

Are we sensing a theme here? The bottom line is that coconut oil is devoid of vitamins, minerals, and most other nutrients. It is pure fat, and worse than that, it's over 90% saturated fat. The same saturated fat that raises our cholesterol, clogs our arteries, and contributes to our heart attacks. In the 1980s, the American Heart Association recognized coconut oil's high saturated fat content as being overall destructive to heart health, as well as specifically promoting heart damage and disease. As a result, they continued to advise the reduction of all saturated fats, including coconut oil, to less than 7% of dietary calories. This opinion is shared by the World Health Organization and the FDA, both recommending decreasing intake of saturated fats, because the reduction of saturated fat, including coconut oil, has been shown to benefit our overall health.

In light of this information, coconut oil seems better served in our cars and on our skin, and really should never be used in our food. Having said that, if you enjoy the taste of coconut, or if a little bit of coconut is helping you stay on this healthy new diet and lifestyle, then using a little bit of the whole plant food, not the oil, once in a generous while, is okay.

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