

Coconut Oil

Many now embrace it for a range of ills, contrary to warnings about its saturated fat.

By Beth Decarbo

Filipinos call coconut trees the "tree of life" for all the products derived from its leaves, husks, meat and milk. In America, the coconut tree has made new believers because of one product: coconut oil.

Converts to coconut oil are zealous in their claims. They say it aids in weight loss, can reduce the risk of heart disease and increases HDL, or "good" cholesterol levels. It is also said to improve digestion, reduce acid reflux and lessen symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. Some take it to improve their skin tone and prevent wrinkles. Some even treat herpes and cancer with coconut oil

Ernie Rudloff of Woodbury credits coconut oil with boosting his energy. He started taking the supplement in the fall after reading Kevin Trudeau's bestselling book, "Natural Cures 'They' Don't Want You to Know About." In it, the author touts the curative powers of all-natural substances, saying drug companies suppress this information to increase sales of pharmaceuticals.

Claims by Trudeau, who has no medical training, have drawn fire from both the U.S. Federal Trade Commission and Food and Drug Administration. Nonetheless, Trudeau's book has sold millions of copies both in stores and via TV infomercials.

"I find a lot of Trudeau's logic to be true," Rudloff says. "The natural approach is something we should look at more. Everything seems to be drug, drug, drug. We go to the doctor or to the pharmacy, and we want a pill for everything."

Rudloff, 63, helps about 120 youths - ages 16 to 21 - get their GED certificates at the Nassau County Correctional Center. He also officiates basketball games on the side, so he faces both emotional and physical challenges. Rudloff was taking about one tablespoon of coconut oil twice a day when he noticed the effect: "I felt energized."

He says he doesn't have an opinion about coconut oil's wide-ranging claims because he's basically in good health - weight in the 170s and total cholesterol about 200. He was treated for prostate cancer two years ago and now takes Flomax to reduce the urgency to urinate but says he is otherwise healthy. Rudloff sees himself as health-conscious, and as he heads toward his mid- and late-60s, he's open to natural remedies.

"Natural cures are safer," he says. "They come from the earth. They don't have all the side effects of all these chemicals people take."

Still, doctors and other health-care providers urge caution, because natural supplements don't face the same rigorous approval process that's imposed on pharmaceutical companies. In general, the medical community doesn't consider coconut oil a heart-healthy food because it's very high in saturated fat, which has been linked to high cholesterol and heart disease.

Dr. Walter C. Willett, a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, offered insights on coconut oil last year in the Harvard Health Letter: A 2-ounce piece of fresh coconut contains more than 13 grams of saturated fat - nearly two-thirds of the recommended daily limit for the average person. Ounce for ounce, coconut oil delivers more saturated fat than butter, lard or margarine. Feeding studies in humans, monkeys and rabbits show that coconut oil substantially elevates LDL (bad) cholesterol.

In an e-mail interview, Willett agrees that the oil has a powerful effect in boosting HDL (good) cholesterol. But overall, Willett says, "I think it is OK to use it when the flavor is desired

or when a little hard fat is needed, but I would not recommend it as a primary form of fat unless we have further research regarding its effect on heart disease."

A unique kind of fat

Bruce Fife, a naturopath - a practitioner who treats patients with herbs, vitamins and other natural remedies - a nutritionist and the author of "The Coconut Oil Miracle," opposes the detractors, arguing that the saturated fat found in plant foods is different than that found in animal products.

"Coconut oil is unique because it's composed predominantly of medium-chain fatty acids," Fife says, adding that most fats in the American diet are composed of long-chain fatty acids. He says the shorter chain makes coconut oil easier to digest, and it's processed like a carbohydrate and not stored in the body as fat.

Fife tries to eat about three tablespoons of coconut oil a day. He encourages people to use it in cooking - in hot cereal, casseroles and soups. When Fife feels like he hasn't had enough, he'll take a spoonful right out of the jar and let it melt under his tongue. "A good coconut oil actually has a pleasant taste," he says.

Fife has never had his cholesterol tested, so he can't say what effect the oil has had on his blood levels. The main benefit he cites is on his immune system. "I believe it has made me healthier and more resistant to illnesses. I haven't had an illness for years and years and years," he says.

Since "The Coconut Oil Miracle" was published in 2000, Fife has written five other books on the subject, and he frequently speaks to audiences around the world on the topic. He believes his life's work has helped build a market for the product.

Spreading the gospel

"When I first published 'The Coconut Oil Miracle' book in 2000, I included sources where people could find coconut oil, because it was impossible to find," he says. "Today, if you walk into a health-food store, you'll find five or six brands available. Even places like Wal-Mart, major retailers, are starting to stock it."

The Nutrition Business Journal, which tracks the health-food and supplements industry, cites a sharp increase in plant-oil sales in the United States in 2003 and 2004, the latest data available. While sales of coconut oil are not tracked individually, sales of the plant-oil category were up 32 percent in 2003 and 27 percent the next year.

Daniel Fabricant, vice president of scientific affairs with the Natural Products Association, says he's hearing a lot more about coconut oil. "I don't have numbers to support it, but you do see more of it on the shelves these days," he says.

Fabricant, whose organization represents the natural foods and supplements industry, says coconut oil got a bad reputation in the 1970s and '80s when low-fat diets were all the rage. "People now understand that fats are essential," he says.

"There are some benefits with all kinds of fats - fish oil, flaxseed oil, coconut oil. People are now saying, 'Hey, maybe this low-fat [lifestyle] isn't the way to go. You're really seeing a revival.'"

Because it has a longer shelf life than many other oils, coconut oil is a convenient pantry item because it won't go rancid. And it also has a higher smoke point than other oils, so it's a natural for cooking with high heat.

Yet, knowing that coconut oil and other tropical oils such as palm oil and cocoa butter are high in saturated fat, Fabricant recommends moderation. "I think maybe adding some of these

saturated fats in small amounts could offer some healthy benefits because you're adding diversity to your diet.

"Pushing anything as a miracle food isn't good. People who add a little coconut oil to their diet may see some good from it, but they shouldn't eat only coconut oil. There should be a rainbow of fats," Fabricant says.

VIRGIN OR REFINED: A MATTER OF TASTE

Coconut oil comes in two basic forms: virgin and refined. The virgin form has minimal processing, without high temperatures or chemicals. The flavor of virgin coconut oil varies by brand, depending on how it's produced. Some oils taste better than others, so you may try several brands before you find one you like.

The refined oil has been bleached and deodorized and has almost no flavor. This is what's used in the food industry. Choosing between the virgin or refined coconut oil is a matter of preference and taste.

Finally, coconut oil is also available in soft capsules for people who don't like the taste of coconut or who won't be cooking with it.

A 16-ounce jar of coconut oil or a bottle of 120 coconut oil capsules costs between \$12 and \$15.

- Beth DeCarbo