



Ask the Nutritionist

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MIIA's Integrative Nutrition Coordinator

Dear Sandy,

I have heard a lot about the potential health benefits of coconut oil. My friend actually puts coconut oil in her coffee. Is coconut oil healthy?

Answer:

Thank you for your question. I understand the confusion as 72% of the American public considers coconut oil to be healthy. Coconut oil sounds like something that should be good for us given that the raw fruit contains nutrients, antioxidants, and fiber. Also, fitness enthusiasts support the hydrating effects of coconut water. But the benefits of coconut products don't magically transfer over to coconut oil. Most of the nutrients found in raw coconut are stripped out during the processing to make it an oil.

A recent meta-analysis of over 100 studies advises against the use of coconut oil. The reason is its extremely high saturated fat content. More than 80% of coconut oil is saturated fat. One tablespoon of coconut oil has 12 grams of saturated fat and 14 grams of total fat. Believe it or not, this is the same fat and saturated fat content of bacon grease! Extensive research shows that coconut oil increases LDL-cholesterol, the bad type that clogs arteries and increases heart disease risk. In

terms of which fat to use, it's a toss-up between butter and coconut oil. It can be used to replace butter in a plant-based diet. But for heart health, the best types of oils are monounsaturated and polyunsaturated oil, the healthiest choice being extra virgin olive oil. Other than culinary purposes, coconut oil is acknowledged for hair and skin health as evidenced by its presence in many beauty products.

Coconut oil in coffee has been a fad lately due to its high content of MCT's or medium chain triglycerides. MCT's are rapidly absorbed and delivered to the liver as a source of energy or converted to ketones. So, although you might get a small metabolic kick from drinking coconut coffee, it's high in calories. The 121 calories per tablespoon or 242 calories for 2 tablespoons of coconut oil will probably erase the purported increase in metabolic rate.

Don't fall into the trap of considering coconut oil a "healthy" alternative to other cooking oils. It's a high fat, high calorie food that should be used very occasionally in your diet.