

Crazy for coconut

Coconut has been getting a lot of attention about potential health benefits, but is there any truth to the claims being made?

Posted on **March 3, 2015** by [Kara Lynch \(http://msue.anr.msu.edu/experts/kara_lynch\)](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/experts/kara_lynch), Michigan State University Extension

Treatment for Alzheimer's. Good for your heart. Treats diabetes or cancer. Reduces body fat. These are some of the recent health claims that coconut has been linked to. Coconut is rivaled as one of the highest sources of saturated fat (also known as, "bad fat"); however there are many claims that this food has magic powers. It has been put into waters, cereals, snack foods and used in more and more cooking, making coconut an in-demand product. But how factual are these claims, and will consuming more actually help you or harm you?

The fact is, coconut is one of the highest sources of saturated fat you can consume. See Table 1 below for a comparison of saturated fat in foods. Many studies have demonstrated the negative effects that saturated fat can have on your heart health, as they are responsible for depositing fats that eventually clog our arteries. While there are ongoing studies to determine if the saturated fat from coconut oil works differently in our body than other saturated fats, they are composed of the same types of fatty acids as other sources. Until evidence proves otherwise, saturated fat should be limited. There is a long history of well documented studies proving that saturated fats clog our arteries and we should keep saturated fat intake to **less than 10 percent of our calories**, according to the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010 \(pdf\)](#).

Table 1

Food	Percent Saturated fat
Coconut oil	91 percent
Palm Kernel Oil	86 percent
Olive oil	14 percent

Ground Beef	23 percent
Skinless chicken breast	4 percent
Dietary Recommendation	Less than 10 percent; or less than 7 percent (if at risk for heart disease)

There is currently no known cure for Alzheimer's Disease, and the treatment options are limited. Consuming coconut oil to treat this disease may actually be increasing your risk of another disease, such as heart disease. There is also [no documented evidence](http://www.foodinsight.org/CoconutOilAndHealth) (<http://www.foodinsight.org/CoconutOilAndHealth>) supporting the use of coconut oil for antimicrobial treatment, cancers, thyroid disease or anti-inflammatory effects.

The fact is, coconut and its derivatives, tastes good, so it's easy for society to want this to work, to be the solution to our obesity and weight problems. The typical Western diet contains many components that can lead to health woes, such as excess total fat, saturated fat, Trans fat, refined sugars and sodium. Isolating just one of these as the friend or foe in our diet can be misleading. In other words, using **more** coconut oil, which does not have evidence to support benefits, and **not** making healthy choices such as getting the [recommended amount of physical activity](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/) (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>) and eating the [recommended fruits, vegetables and whole grains](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/) (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>) is very unlikely to improve your health.

What is the take home message? Moderation! [Michigan State University Extension \(/\)](#) recommends that all foods be consumed in moderation, including coconut oil. Using coconut oil as a substitute for butter in a dessert, for example, can lead to a product with similar nutrient composition. What you want to avoid is substituting coconut oil for the highly unsaturated olive oil or canola oil, as those have well documented health benefits. Lastly, try coconut flavored water, which can be a tasty treat without the added fat, and can be added to smoothies or mixed with other beverages.

This article was published by [Michigan State University Extension](http://www.msue.msu.edu) (<http://www.msue.msu.edu>). For more information, visit <http://www.msue.msu.edu> (<http://www.msue.msu.edu>). To have a digest of information delivered straight to your email inbox, visit <http://bit.ly/MSUENews> (<http://bit.ly/MSUENews>). To contact an expert in your area, visit <http://expert.msue.msu.edu> (<http://expert.msue.msu.edu>), or call 888-MSUE4MI (888-678-3464).