

# The not so simple truth about Coconut Oil

December 25, 2015 | Andy the RD

A solid white mass at room temperature, coconut oil is immediately distinguishable from other commercially available oil products. Coconut oil's uniquely high saturated fat content is the reason why it remains solid while just about every other oil on the shelves is liquid at room temperature. Coconut oil's high saturated fat content also contributes to its high smoking point. A high smoking point means that coconut oil is a safe choice for cooking methods that use high temperatures, such as frying or deep frying, thus making it a safe choice for cooking at high temperatures. Low smoke point oils, such as olive oil, are less safe to use at high temperatures because they smoke more easily and form unhealthy compounds in the process. (For your reference, [canola and sunflower oil](#) are commonly used oils that have high smoke points, similar to coconut oil).

Coconut oil's unique characteristics, along with its exotic nature and the commercial exaggeration of its potential health benefits, have helped the oil gain incredible media attention over the past few years, with a feature on the Dr. Oz show among the most noteworthy. You may have even heard that coconut oil has miraculous effects on weight loss, diabetes or other chronic diseases. These claims are not supported by strong scientific evidence yet they serve to perpetuate the mystique and consumer interest that surrounds coconut oil.



I first encountered coconut oil as a graduate student co-teaching a heart healthy nutrition class several years ago at Toronto Western Hospital. The topic of coconut oil came up and caused quite a stir with the audience members. We were discussing eating practices for secondary-prevention of heart disease (essentially how to eat to prevent a second heart attack if you have already had one) and I had not yet caught on to the growing consumer interest in coconut oil as a health food. One of the fascinating aspects of coconut oil is that it is comprised of 92% saturated fats, a far greater amount than other common oils like olive or canola. When the topic of saturated fats came up in the presentation, one of the participants brought up coconut oil as a point of contention. Even my mentor, a brilliant woman who was co-teaching the class, struggled to adequately address the participants query. Why was that so?

Traditional scientific evidence has shown us time and time again that saturated fats are detrimental to the health of our heart because they lower "good" cholesterol levels (HDL) and raise "bad" cholesterol levels (LDL). How was it then that coconut oil, a product extremely rich in saturated fats, was gaining traction as a health food item? Part of the explanation relies on the fact that the saturated fat in coconut is chemically different to the saturated fat we find in the animal products (such as fatty meat, butter) that represent the most common sources of saturated fat intake.

## To summarize thus far:

- 1) Coconut oil is very high in saturated fat, the same type of fat found in meat and dairy.
- But...*
- 2) The saturated fat in coconut oil is a **chemically different variety** of saturated fat.

At the time this issue first arose, the effect of this difference in the type of saturated fat on our health was exaggerated because the research on the subject was not of the highest quality. The claims of coconut oils health benefits were overblown as a result. Although research in the area of saturated fats continues to develop, our current understanding of the unique way that coconut oil's saturated fats effect us has become more clear.

## How Coconut Oil effects us:

- 1) Coconut oil raises our healthy cholesterol levels (HDL), other high saturated fat items such as butter do not.

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And

2) Coconut oil also raises our unhealthy cholesterol levels (LDL), but **not as much** as other similar high saturated fat items such as butter.

This means that coconut oil is certainly a better choice than butter, but it may not be a better choice for frying than other high smoke point oil products such as canola, sunflower or other similar oils. Science has shown us consistently that the fats in these oils increase our HDL **and** reduce our LDL.

Does this mean that it never makes sense to use coconut oil? Coconut oil's high smoke point makes it useful for occasional frying recipes and its distinct taste may be suitable for certain foods well. In my opinion, it would be wise to use coconut oil only occasionally. This is especially true if you are on a tight food budget, as I have noticed that coconut oil can be up to double the price per millilitre compared to other commonly consumed oils.

I would also like you to be aware of the fact that, if you are an otherwise healthy person who eats well on a regular basis, it will matter much less whether you have coconut oil once a week, three times a week, or not at all. Have coconut oil if a recipe calls for it, or if you are in the mood for it, not because it is a miracle food, because I don't believe it is.

Until next time, Eat Up!  
Andy De Santis RD MPH

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