

Coconut oil is the latest food trend offering health claims

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Coconut oil is returning to the kitchen, thanks to a boost from those in the nutrition business who have taken a fresh look at the numbers.

Those numbers, according to an article in Today's Dietitian by Aglae Jacob, show the [fat](#) in coconut oil might raise "good" HDL cholesterol and lower "bad" LDL cholesterol while also burning body fat rather than storing it.

"Some research has shown that increased coconut oil consumption leads to reduced [cholesterol production](#), less oxidation (hardening) of LDL cholesterol and better ability to break up [blood clots](#)," says Laura Brieser-Smith, a dietitian and owner of Healthy Designs nutrition counseling in Denver.

For those who avoid animal products, such as vegetarians and vegans, using coconut oil is becoming popular.

"If you're going to fry something," says Alan Roettinger, author of "Extraordinary Vegan," "extra-virgin coconut oil is the best vegan medium for it."

Lily Nichols, a dietitian and owner of a private nutrition business in Los Angeles, says, "Being mostly aerated, (coconut oil is) an optimal fat for cooking since the fats aren't easily damaged by heat. I recommend it frequently to my clients, and the flavor is incredible."

However, Patricia Kulbeth, a clinical dietitian at Memorial Health System Outpatient Nutrition Services, is cautious about coconut oil use.

"Coconut oil is still a fat and should not be excessively used," she says.

Kulbeth's point is that too much of any fat in the diet can cause weight gain and contribute to diabetes and heart disease.

"When any new food is in the news, people tend to eat too much of it," she said. "This is my concern."

Marleen Swanson, a dietitian and department chair of culinary nutrition at Johnson & Wales University in Denver, is also cautious about coconut oil's role in the diet.

"Basically, it still is a [saturated fat](#) and needs to be regarded as such," she says. "It has gotten rave reviews of late because of the vegan diet. Certainly, it fits as a spread in place of butter for these people, but it's still a saturated fat. The one pro of coconut oil is that it is a medium-chain fat that is more easily absorbed in the body."

Swanson is referring to coconut oil's biochemical makeup. In Jacob's article in Today's Dietitian, she describes the fat in coconut oil as medium-chain fatty acids, or MCFAs, as opposed to long-chain fatty acids, or LCFAs. Of the fat in coconut oil, 65 percent is MCFAs, which don't need to break down into single [fatty acids](#) for the body to absorb them. They can make their way directly to the liver for easier absorption. The unique structure of the MCFAs in coconut oil make them easier to burn and harder to store in adipose tissue, compared with the LCFAs found in other fats.

Kulbeth remains skeptical.

"Even though the type of saturated fats in coconut is medium-chain and is purported to be healthier, it is still not as healthy a type of fat as is olive oil or other high mono- and polyunsaturated fats," she said. "It is my opinion that coconut milk or coconut oil should not be used as a main part of the fat intake in the diets but could be used along with other healthier oils as part of a healthy diet."

Her rule of thumb is that calories from fat should not be more than 30 percent of your total daily intake of calories.

Until further research indicates coconut oil is better than other saturated fats, it seems prudent to enjoy the great flavor of coconut oil in moderation. Here are some more numbers to keep in mind about coconut oil: One tablespoon of [coconut oil](#) contains 117 calories, 14 grams of fat, 12 grams of saturated fat, and no vitamins or minerals.

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