

The exotic coconut: The 'super nut' (Part 5)



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In the last episode, Part 4, I spoke about some of the effects of coconut oil as well as the controversy going around it. Because lauric acid is a saturated fatty acid in coconut oil, mainstream medicine claims it to be a harmful saturated fat to the cardiovascular system. On the other hand, its proponents attack the flawed research done in the 1990s on hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated coconut oil and not the virgin oil. Besides, not all saturated fats act the same way in the body, especially since coconut oil is of plant origin. Avocado oil (monounsaturated fatty acid) was maligned, too, for sometime, until scientific research exonerated it. Now, it is lauded for its heart healthy fatty acids.

Now, allow me to give you scientific facts about coconut oil. But before I start, I would like to remind you that what we are talking about is a fat that has been relied upon for millenniums in Southeast Asia, in the Far East, in the Tropics, and in the Pacific Islands. These nations of billions of people added coconut oil and milk to their daily meals; applied the oil on their skins and hair; and used it as medicine for many different ailments. The natives and the Pacific Islanders were as healthy as can be until they left their traditional diets and started consuming Western style fast, processed, starchy, fried foods, and trans fatty acids (corn and soya oils) as well as drinking soda and sweetened beverages. For a long time the coconut was known to be healthy, until the food industry began partially-hydrogenating the once "healthy" oil and making it convenient for industrialized processed and packaged snacks and foods. That is when health issues emerged.

It was in 1994 that the sinless coconut oil was vilified and fell in disgrace. The Center for Science in the Public Interest relied on a study that found that the large cones of popcorn sold at the movie houses contained the same amount of saturated fat as six Big Macs. People did not question the statement at that time, but what the food industry used was partially hydrogenated coconut oil in processed foods and bakery goods and not the natural oil. Not even saturated fats are as harmful as trans fats.

Because more research point to trans fatty acids from vegetable oils (corn, soy, canola...) as "harmful" fats, when heated, they should be avoided to prevent cardiovascular plaque and inflammation in the body. Their adverse effects increase even more, when they are hydrogenated. New York city has banned the use of trans fats in restaurants and fast food eateries.

Until recently, coconut oil in all its forms was the fat that was condemned for its "innocent" saturated fatty acid, lauric acid, not making a differentiation between the virgin oil and partially hydrogenated coconut oil used in pre-packaged manufactured baked goods. In the last few years, this perception changed with the increase in demand by vegans, vegetarians, and natural food seekers. Fortunately, scientific evidence vindicated the oil, by pointing to its health benefits.

Prominent scientist Thomas Brenna, professor of nutritional science at Cornell University, has a factual view on the natural fat, which has been vilified for twenty years. He says "Most studies involving coconut oil were done with partially hydrogenated oil, which researchers used [purposely], because they needed to raise the cholesterol levels of their rabbits in order to collect certain data. Virgin coconut oil, which has not been chemically treated is a different thing in terms of a health risk perspective. And maybe it isn't so bad for you after all."

Hydrogenation, partial hydrogenation, and heat alter the configuration of vegetable fats, transforming them into harmful trans fats. Such fats are implicated in cardiovascular disorders, which make endogenous (internal) inflammation and obesity, leading to heart disease, strokes, blood clots, diabetes type 2, dementia, and fatal heart attacks. Hydrogenation destroys the benefits of healthy fatty acids, antioxidants, and other healthy compounds found in virgin coconut oil. Though most of the fatty acids in the oil are saturated, Dr. Brenna says, "... We in the nutrition field are beginning to say that saturated fats are not so bad, and evidence that said they were is not so strong." Besides, all saturated fats are not the same. There is a big difference between hydrogenated and virgin coconut oil.

According to Marissa Moore, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, she believes that "Different types of saturated fats behave differently" in the body. Our brains, heart, the other organs, the metabolism, glands, hormonal and immune systems, and the other systems require the correct doses of different "healthy" fatty acids such as polyunsaturated fatty acids from nuts and fish, flaxseeds (omega 3 fats), and borage (omega 6 fats), monounsaturated fats from olive and avocado oils, medium chain triglycerides (MCT), or lauric acid, from coconut and palm oil, and even a little saturated fats from free range, organic meat, poultry, and dairy (no antibiotics, hormones, arsenic, pesticides, herbicides...). Cattle and sheep should be fed uncontaminated grass, alfalfa, and greens and not GMO (genetically modified microorganisms) corn, soy, and other omega 6 rich grains, which alter the makeup of their meat. Sadly, farmed salmon, fish, and shrimps are also given feed (omega 6 rich fats...), which is not meant for them.

Coconut oil's main saturated fat is lauric acid, which is a medium chain fatty acid. In studies, lauric acid has been shown to raise both "good" HDL (high density lipoprotein) and "bad" LDL (low density lipoprotein) in blood serum, but maintains their healthy ratio. Studies on women have shown that the oil has been also found to raise the levels of the "healthy" cholesterol, HDL, while enhancing HDL to LDL ratio, an indicator of good heart health.

Other studies showed that the intake of this saturated fat improved the ratio of the low-density lipoprotein to the high-density lipoprotein (LDL: HDL) in the blood. This indicates that natural coconut oil should be considered as a "harmful" saturated fat that leads to the buildup of artery plaque.

On another front, lauric acid, or medium chain triglycerides (MCT), and capric and caprylic acids in coconut oil appeared to reduce the risk of heart disease by fighting off low-grade bacterial and viral infections, which were closely associated with the disease. Lauric acid is converted in the body into a compound called monolaurin, which is an antiviral, antimicrobial, and fungal agent, destroying pathogens and protecting against infections and viruses.

MCT also appear to lower levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), which is an inflammation biomarker and an indicator of heart disease. Research points to it as the underlying cause of heart conditions and most disorders.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) suggests saturated fats should not be higher than 10 percent of calorie daily intake. Scientific verdict is not yet all out on virgin coconut oil, which needs to be thoroughly researched and totally vindicated from the 1994 guilt of causing cholesterol plaque and heart and cardiovascular disorders.

Next week, I shall pursue exploring the other different benefits of the coconut and its unbelievably curative pure virgin oil in unexpected areas of health.

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N.B.:

Individuals with medical conditions or on medication should consult their physicians when they decide to introduce anything new in their diet even if it is natural.

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