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Is the Coconut the Next Super Food in Waiting?

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In the UK this year we're expected to get through a massive 25million litres of coconut water- it's boom time for the cloudy thirst quencher which is touted as the new superfood . But does coconut water really offer anything more than tap water?

Well, it does contain some natural sugars so there are some calories (not enough to worry about) which you don't get in tap water. But, along with the sugar comes a good dose of potassium and magnesium - both important minerals for keeping you healthy. As well minerals, coconut water also contains electrolytes helping your body absorb the water efficiently. This is why people use it for rehydration after sports [and as pretty effective hangover cure]. Although you wouldn't necessarily replace tap water for coconut water you'd do well to swap your fizzy sugar soft drinks for this new kid on the block.

Coconuts have been referred to as the "milk bottle on the door step of mankind" and it has long played a significant role in the diets of our human ancestors. Botanically, the coconut (*Cocus nucifera*) belongs to the Palm family and is found growing around the world along tropical coastlines. Officially the coconut isn't a nut at all- it's a fruit with the hard shell enclosing the seed. The shell is amazingly strong and helps the coconut float extremely well, it also protects the seed from salt water and allows it to travel so new coconut trees spread and grow along the shore.

At home, an unopened coconut will last up to four months in the kitchen, while freezing it whole will extend its life up to nine months. But once opened, it should be refrigerated and used within a week or it will turn rancid. This is due to the substantial amount of oil contained in the flesh.

Coconuts can be used at two stages of ripeness. In the Middle East the fruits are sold green and immature when the flesh still has a jelly like texture and the liquid is clear- this is in fact the coconut water. In the West, the fruits are more commonly used fully ripened when they have brown skins and solid white flesh. At this stage of ripeness most of the water has been absorbed by the flesh. Getting to all the ripe coconut flesh is no easy task and can take quite a bit time and skill.

Although coconuts are versatile and the different parts are used for different functions, it is coconut milk or cream and desiccated coconut that is best known in the UK. Coconut milk is the extract of freshly grated coconut flesh that's been soaked in hot water and then strained, consisting of one part coconut to one part liquid. Coconut milk can even be made at home. The milk is ideal for flavouring stews, sauces, creams, ice creams and drinks.

Coconut cream is basically just thicker coconut milk. Both coconut cream and milk are available canned from most supermarkets.

More recently coconut cream and milk have received some bad press due to their high saturated fat content, which is unusual for a plant food. Saturated fats, generally found in animal foods are bad for the heart. Western diets are already high in saturated animal so using coconut milk and cream is best kept for recipes where you really want the flavour and texture they provide.

Coconut milk can be used as an alternative to cow's milk in cooking and some people report that it is easier to digest because it doesn't contain the milk sugar lactose. 'Light' coconut milk and cream do contain less saturated fats, but the flavour is a little less intense. They're still worth a try though.

Desiccated or shredded coconut is the result of processing and drying the flesh of the coconut. It is available sweetened or unsweetened, shredded or flaked, dried or moist.

Whether coconut water deserves the title of super food or not is debatable. One thing's for sure though, the coconut itself is one of nature's survivors. We've found a use for just about every part of the coconut- we eat it, cook with it and even use the tough coconut hair to make matting. With our growing thirst for coconut water the future for coconuts looks pretty bright.