

Coconuts' health bounty

The coconut palm is traditionally known as the 'tree of life' for the many health benefits of its products. **David Hughes** reports

AFICIONADOS OF *Mutiny on the Bounty* may recall that trouble really kicked off when Captain Bligh accused his Lieutenant, Fletcher Christian, of stealing from the ship's store of coconuts.

Historians have neglected to consider whether Bligh's annoyance was due to the value of coconuts in managing weight loss, boosting the immune system, aiding digestion, helping dental health and bone density, balancing high blood pressure, reducing stress and protecting the skin – but no doubt these benefits came in useful for Bligh during his subsequent 46 days in an open boat.

Fletcher Christian's descendants, and the rest of us, can now readily obtain coconuts without risk of being hunted down by the Royal Navy. Indeed, demand

is booming, fuelled by a desire for natural health care, increasing scientific evidence for the benefits of coconut products, and the ongoing rehabilitation of high-fat foods.

Avocados, cheese, dark chocolate, eggs, nuts and olive oil – all have a high fat content, yet all are now pronounced good for our health. So it is with coconuts and coconut oil, among the richest sources of saturated fat on the planet (more than 90 per cent of the fatty acids in coconuts are saturated).

However, this particular saturated fat is not as unhealthy as it might seem. Coconut fats mostly comprise medium-chain fatty acids (MCFAs), which are assimilated well in the body. However, experts still advise caution and the use of coconut oil in moderation.

Brain booster

MCFAs are metabolised in the liver, being converted into energy for muscles and so-called ketone bodies, which are good for the brain; coconut oil has been found to improve cognitive function, and may help protect against Alzheimer's.

Helping the heart

Forty per cent of coconut's medium-chain fatty acids is lauric acid, which is converted into monolaurin, guarding against viruses and bacteria. Lauric acid also helps prevent heart-related problems such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels by improving 'good' cholesterol levels. Coconut oil reduces the incidence of injuries and damage to arteries, and so helps prevent atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries).



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Weight control

As we grow older, our metabolisms slow down, making it harder to maintain healthy weight. Coconut oil raises the metabolic rate, burning more energy

without effort and assisting weight loss. One study found that 15 to 30 grams of medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs) a day increased 24-hour energy expenditure by five per cent, compared with the same amount of calories from longer-chain fats.

Obesity is not common among people living in tropical coastal areas who use coconut oil for cooking. Coconut oil is a healthy alternative to sugary snacks between meals – a spoonful will satisfy sugar cravings without adding excess calories. Coconut oil also aids digestion, which itself helps nutrition, and protects the body against insulin resistance, reducing the likelihood of developing Type 2 diabetes.

Dental health

Caprylic acid, caproic acid, myristic acid and lauric acid, all found in coconut oil, have antifungal, antiviral and antibacterial qualities, making the oil useful for healing cuts, and also for dealing with mouth and throat infections. It also improves the absorption of calcium, which helps maintain strong teeth. A practice known as 'oil pulling,' used in the 5000-year-old Ayurvedic natural health tradition in India, involves holding coconut oil (about a teaspoon-full) in the mouth for 20 minutes, and then spitting it out. Modern scientific studies have confirmed that this combats gingivitis, plaque, and microorganisms that cause bad breath, as well as preventing tooth decay.

Strong bones

Aiding the absorption of minerals – including calcium and magnesium – is not only good for the teeth, it also helps keep our bones strong, so coconut oil is useful in staving off osteoporosis.

Liver tonic

Coconut oil reduces the workload of the liver and prevents the accumulation of fat. It's also said to help with kidney and gall bladder diseases, and to help dissolve kidney stones.

Healthy skin

Applied directly to the skin, coconut oil strengthens connective tissue – so preventing sagging and wrinkles – hydrates the skin, and generally promotes a healthy glow, with its host of antioxidants helping to prevent premature skin ageing. Coconut oil is also used against problems such as psoriasis, dermatitis and eczema.

Hair care

Applied directly to the hair and scalp, coconut oil is widely used in India to provide easily-absorbed nutrients, particularly to reduce protein loss and to heal damaged hair.

Stress relief

Coconut oil is cooling, and soothing. Applied to the forehead, it can help relieve anger, mental fatigue and stress, and combat insomnia.

HIV protection

Some preliminary evidence even exists for the effectiveness of coconut oil in reducing the viral susceptibility of HIV patients.

Energy and endurance

Athletes, bodybuilders, and those of us who find our energy levels aren't what they used to be, can find coconut oil a healthy aid for boosting endurance, as its fat content is quickly converted into energy without accumulating in the arteries.

Find out more

- www.bhf.org.uk/coconut-oil
- www.organicfacts.net
- www.health.com
- www.coconutoil.com
- Audio book: *Coconut Oil for Beginners: Benefits, Cures, Uses, and Remedies for Health Benefits, Beauty Secrets, Weight Loss, Skin Care, Hair Care, Pet Care and Delicious Recipes* by Tammi Diamond (37 minutes, £3.09). Available from: www.audible.co.uk.

Types of coconut oil

- **Pure coconut oil:** This is extracted from dried coconut kernels, also known as copra. It's unrefined and without any additives
- **Refined coconut oil:** This is refined, deodorised and bleached, with particles (such as proteins) removed. Fletcher Christian wouldn't have bothered stealing this
- **Virgin coconut oil:** Derived from the milk obtained from fresh coconut meat, this is the most common type found in health food shops, and uses little or no (cold-pressed) heat in the extraction of the oil. Heating destroys many of the nutrients, so look for cold-pressed varieties. It's probably the most popular type of coconut oil
- **Organic coconut oil:** Extracted from coconuts obtained from palms raised to organic standards, and without using any chemical in its extraction or processing
- **Organic virgin coconut oil:** Probably the best and purest form of coconut oil. Various brands of virgin, cold-pressed coconut oil are available in health food shops and many mainstream supermarkets, as demand increases by leaps and bounds. Holland & Barrett reports sales of coconut products up by 406 per cent last year, and has introduced a range of 28 coconut products including coconut oil capsules.

Coconut oil has a high melting temperature – about 25°C – which on the one hand makes it useful for cooking, but on the other means that at room temperature it is likely to be solid. To use coconut oil topically, as a hair or skin treatment, you can simply hold a lump of the solid oil in your hand until it melts, and then apply it to the skin/hair.



■ Coconut Merchant Coconut Oil (£8.99 for a 500ml jar) is stocked by Amazon.co.uk, Holland and Barrett, Selfridges and independent health stores. Or order it online at www.coconut-merchant.com, tel: 20 3772 6540.

