

## Coconut Oil: A Miracle Food

by Bruce Fife, ND

The quality of the food we eat has an enormous impact on our state of health. The healthier our foods are, the healthier we are. For this reason, it is important that we eat the foods that provide the most benefit. Some foods are good because they are loaded with vitamins and minerals as well as fiber. A few are classified as functional foods because they provide health benefits beyond their nutritional content. These foods have therapeutic value that can protect us from many common health problems.

One such food is so powerful that I have seen it clear up flu symptoms almost overnight, stop bladder infections, remove precancerous skin lesions, bring quick relief from Crohn's disease, heal chronic psoriasis, and improve symptoms associated with hypoglycemia, diabetes, hypothyroidism, and chronic fatigue, among others. Medical researchers are now using it in the fight against AIDS.

What is this incredible health food? You may be surprised to learn that this miracle of nature is coconut, more specifically, coconut oil. Shocked? Most people are.

Once mistakenly believed to be bad for the heart because of its saturated fat content, coconut oil is now known to contain a unique form of saturated fat that actually helps prevent heart disease, stroke, and hardening of the arteries as well as provide many other health benefits.

Interestingly enough, the secret to coconut oil's healing powers came as a result of research on human breast milk. Breast milk has been called nature's perfect food. It contains all the vitamins, minerals, and other substances necessary to feed a baby for the first year or so of life. Within this milk are certain nutrients that not only provide an ideal source of nourishment but also protect the baby from disease causing bacteria, viruses, and fungi that are so prevalent in our environment.

Years ago it was discovered that human breast milk contains a unique group of saturated fats known as medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs). These fats are very different from the fats in meat and vegetables that are commonly found in our foods.

When eaten, the body transforms MCTs into monoglycerides and medium-chain fatty acids (MCFAs), both of which possess powerful antimicrobial properties capable of killing disease causing bacteria, viruses, and fungi. It is due primarily to the presences of MCTs in human breast milk that protect babies from infections for the first few months of their lives while their immune systems are still developing.

The fats in our food are composed almost entirely of long-chain triglycerides (LCTs). Some 98 to 100% of the fats and oils we eat consist of LCTs. Other than breast milk there are very few good dietary sources of MCTs. Butter and whole milk contain a small amount. But by far the richest natural source of MCTs comes from coconut. Coconut oil is unique in that it is composed predominately of MCTs. For this reason, coconut oil can have a pronounced impact on our health just as mother's milk does on newborn infants. This is what makes coconut oil different from all other oils and what gives it its unique healing characteristics.

Researchers theorized that if MCTs from breast milk could protect babies from infections, they could also protect other age groups as well. If this is true, a source rich in MCTs would provide a safe and effective way to fight off infectious illnesses. Since coconut oil is the richest natural source of MCTs, researchers have studied it extensively in this respect. They have found that MCFAs, which are created from the breakdown of MCTs in coconut oil, possess very powerful antimicrobial properties. This is well documented in the medical literature. Studies show that MCFAs from coconut oil are effective in killing bacteria that cause ulcers, sinus infections, bladder infections, gum disease and cavities, pneumonia, gonorrhea, and many other illnesses. They kill fungi and yeasts that cause ringworm, athlete's foot, jock itch, and candidiasis. They kill viruses that cause influenza, measles, herpes, mononucleosis, and hepatitis C. They even kill HIV.

Because of the published studies that have shown that MCFAs kills the AIDS virus many HIV infected people have added it to their treatment programs with success. Chris Dafoe of Cloverdale Indiana, had a viral load of 600,000, which indicated the infection was rapidly overpowering his body. He began eating coconut every day. Within weeks his viral load dropped to non-detectable levels. Many others have reported similar experiences.

A clinical study carried out in the Philippines provided more proof that coconut oil is effective in fighting off infection. A group of HIV patients were given 3½ tablespoons of coconut oil a day. They received no other treatment. After 3 months 60% of them had a lower viral load and were doing better.

Antibiotics have been hailed as the miracle drugs of the 20th century. At first they seemed to be effective in stopping many of the dreaded diseases of the past. However, new strains of bacteria have been arising that are resistant to these drugs and infectious illnesses are on the rise. The overuse of antibiotics has led to the rise of these so-called supergerms. Scientists are continually trying to develop new antibiotics to fight these new drug-resistant strains of bacteria.

While antibiotics may be necessary at times, the problem with them is that they are often toxic to us as well as the bacteria they are designed to kill. They affect our health in other ways too. Antibiotics kill all the bacteria in the body, including friendly gut bacteria. In the absence of friendly bacteria in the intestinal tract, candida, a troublesome yeast, is allowed to grow unrestrained. This often leads to candidiasis. MCFAs also kill disease-causing bacteria. But unlike antibiotics, they are not toxic to us and do not harm friendly gut bacteria. An added benefit with MCFAs is that they also kill candida. So the intestinal environment is left in better shape than it was before. In addition, they do not promote antibiotic resistance or the development of so-called supergerms.

MCFAs do another thing antibiotics can't and that is kill viruses. Antibiotics can't touch viruses. In fact, there are no medications that can effectively kill viruses. Vaccination is the only weapon we have against them. When you get the flu there isn't anything the doctor can do for you. All he can do is give you medications that may make the symptoms easier to cope with, but your body has to do all the work in fighting off the infection. Some viral infections can linger on in the body indefinitely. Once infected with herpes or hepatitis C, for example, you have it for life. MCFAs offer a natural, harmless method of ridding the body of these troublemakers or at least allowing you to live a normal life without serious symptoms. No medication can do that. Coconut oil is perhaps the strongest antibacterial, antiviral, and antifungal dietary supplement you can get without a doctor's prescription.

Although MCFAs are deadly to many disease-causing microorganisms, they are completely harmless to us. In fact, they are so safe that nature puts them into mother's milk to nourish newborn infants.

If coconut oil is so effective, why haven't we heard more about it in the treatment of infectious illnesses? The problem with coconut oil is that it is a natural product. Pharmaceutical companies cannot patent it, so they have little interest in developing or promoting it. Most of the interest has come from the health food and supplement industry. In fact, coconut oil in one form or another has been used for some time. Caprylic acid, one of the MCFAs in coconut oil is a popular ingredient in many anti-candida formulations. Monolaurin, another coconut oil derived supplement, is used as a general-purpose antibiotic. Fractionated coconut oil, also known as MCT oil, is a common ingredient in many health and fitness products. Coconut oil has even been put into gel capsules as dietary supplements. Of course, you can also find pure liquid coconut oil in just about any health food store.

Food processors have recognized the importance of MCTs in mother's milk and have been adding it in various forms to infant formula for years. MCTs not only help protect babies from infections but they provide an important source of nutrition. One of the differences between MCTs in coconut oil and the LCTs that are more commonly found in our diet is the way in which our bodies digest and metabolize them. MCTs digest very easily. Unlike LCTs, MCTs do not need pancreatic digesting enzymes or bile for digestion. Because they digest so quickly they provide a quick source of nutrition without taxing the enzyme systems of the body. Studies have shown that when premature infants are given formula containing MCTs they grow faster and have a higher survival rate. This is another reason why they are added to commercial infant formulas.

As the name implies, long-chain triglycerides are larger than medium-chain triglycerides. The size is extremely important because our bodies digest and metabolize each fat differently based on its size. Therefore, the physiological effects of MCTs from coconut oil are distinctly different from those of LCTs. These differences have a pronounced impact on our health.

Let me briefly describe how the two types of fat are digested. When we eat fats composed of LCTs

they travel through the stomach and into the intestinal tract. It is in the intestines where the vast majority of fat digestion occurs. Pancreatic enzymes and bile are necessary for digestion. LCTs are reduced into individual long-chain fatty acids. These fatty acids are absorbed into the intestinal wall. Inside the intestinal wall they are repackaged into bundles of fat and protein called lipoproteins. These lipoproteins are then sent into the bloodstream. As they circulate in the bloodstream they release particles of fat. This is the source of the fat that collects in our fat cells and the fat that collects in and clogs up artery walls. As the lipoproteins get smaller they eventually go to the liver. In the liver they are dismantled and used for energy or repackaged into new lipoproteins and again sent back into the bloodstream to disperse fat throughout the body.

MCTs are processed differently. When we eat a fat containing MCTs, such as coconut oil, it travels through the stomach and into the small intestine. But since MCTs digest quickly, by the time they leave the stomach and enter the intestinal tract they are already broken down into individual fatty acids (MCFAs). Therefore, they do not need pancreatic enzymes or bile for digestion. Since they are already reduced to fatty acids as they enter the small intestine, they are immediately absorbed into the portal vein and sent straight to the liver. In the liver they are preferentially used as a source of fuel to produce energy. MCFAs bypass the lipoprotein stage in the intestinal wall and in the liver. They do not circulate in the bloodstream to the degree that other fats do. Therefore, they do not supply the fat that collects in fat cells nor do they supply the fat that collects in artery walls. MCFAs are used to produce energy, not body fat and not arterial plaque.

The fact that MCTs are easier to digest than other fats is good news for those with digestive concerns. Newborn infants, cystic fibrosis sufferers, those with gallbladder problems, and anyone who has difficulty digesting fats can benefit from using coconut oil. This is particularly true for those who have gallbladder surgery. The surgical removal of the gallbladder makes fat digestion difficult. The gallbladder collects and holds bile secreted by the liver. When we eat a meal containing fat, the gallbladder is emptied into the intestinal tract. Bile emulsifies the fat allowing digestive enzymes to effectively break it down. When the gallbladder has been surgically removed, there is no longer a reservoir of bile. The liver continues to make bile but instead of collecting in the gallbladder it constantly drains into the intestinal tract. Only a small amount of bile is present at any time. If too much fat is eaten at any one time it causes intestinal distress and cramping. So fat consumption needs to be limited.

Because coconut oil digests without the need of bile, those people who have had gallbladder surgery can consume this fat without fear. I have had people tell me they could only handle a very small amount of fat without it causing them discomfort, but they could eat a couple of tablespoons of coconut oil at one time without problem.

Because MCTs are digested and assimilated easily by the body, they increase the absorption of other nutrients as well. Studies show that MCTs enhance the absorption of minerals, particularly calcium and magnesium. They improve the absorption of some of the B vitamins, the fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E, K, and beta-carotene), as well as amino acids. Nature was wise in adding MCTs to breast milk.

Because MCTs provide a quick source of nutrition and improve absorption of other nutrients, coconut oil has been recommended in the treatment of malnutrition. Studies show that when coconut oil is added into the diets of malnourished children their recovery is quicker. Keep in mind that coconut oil does not necessarily supply all the missing nutrients. It simply makes what nutrients that are already present in the diet more bioavailable.

The benefits of coconut oil don't stop there. Research suggests that coconut oil may be of help in preventing numerous other health problems including breast and colon cancer, liver disease, kidney disease, Crohn's disease, chronic fatigue, obesity, and even epilepsy. When you consider all the things coconut oil can do, you can see why I call it nature's miracle oil.

Fortunately, babies aren't the only ones who can benefit from MCFAs. We can all enjoy the benefits of MCFAs by adding coconut oil into our diets.

How do you use it? Some people take it by the spoonful like a dietary supplement. I prefer to use it in food preparation. You can use it in most any recipe that calls for margarine, shortening, butter, or vegetable oil. One of the distinctive characteristics of coconut oil is its high melting point. At

temperatures of 76 degrees F and above the oil is liquid like any other vegetable oil. At temperatures below this it becomes solid like butter. So a jar of coconut oil may be liquid or solid depending on the temperature.

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