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Heart to Heart

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Coconut Oil: Good or bad?

The controversy about the health effects of coconut oil has been going on for decades. The question still remains: Is coconut oil ingestion beneficial or harmful to our body?

The Philippines is the world's largest exporter of coconut oil, accounting for 7% of its total export income. Those who are promoting the sale of coconut and coconut oil hail the products as a healthy food ingredient across the board. However, those in the scientific community carefully make a clear distinction between regular hydrogenated coconut oil and virgin (non-hydrogenated) coconut oil.

Coconut oil and "gata" extracted from coconut, are high in fats (92% saturated fats), commonly used for baking, cooking and in cosmetics. In cosmetics, coconut oil is undisputed for being excellent, especially for the hair. No question or debate there. But for cooking, baking, regular coconut oil is unhealthy because of the saturated fats and trans fats it predominantly contains. On the other hand, virgin coconut oil, which has not undergone hydrogenation (or any processing that uses chemicals), is free of trans fats.

Saturated fats (pork, beef and other red meats, eggs, coconuts) have been proven to cause hardening of the artery, and the resultant cholesterol deposits on the walls of the artery block the blood supply to organs (like the heart, brain, major blood vessels, leading to heart attack, stroke, etc). Saturated fats have also been linked to obesity and cancer.

What are the false claims?

In view of this, the common coconut oil has gained the bad reputation of being unhealthy for regular or frequent consumption. The marketing and commercials on coconut oil, however, have misrepresented the facts. They apparently advertise coconut/coconut oil as healthy food items that lower cholesterol, increase metabolism, aid in weight control, and have some anti-viral, anti-bacterial and anti-fungal action.

And what is the truth?

Some scientific studies suggest that the virgin (non-hydrogenated) coconut oil (with its polyphenol) possibly (?) has these good effects, and that the common regular hydrogenated, chemically-processed, coconut oil and coconut meat, which are the most commonly used form for cooking and baking, are definitely unhealthy, except for cosmetic use and, perhaps, hopefully, as bio-diesel engine fuel in the future. Actually, coconut oil has more saturated fat than butter, beef tallow, and even lard. So coconut oil raises LDL (bad) cholesterol as much – or more – and is worse than the unhealthy animal fats.

What's the difference between the fats?

Saturated fats are solid, but poly- and mono- unsaturated fats are liquid, at room temperature. Saturated fats come from animal fats, coconut oil, butter, lard, margarine, palm oil and palm kernel oil. These are linked to heart attacks, strokes, obesity, and cancer. The two types of unsaturated fats (mono and poly) are the healthier fats. Polyunsaturated fats come from safflower oil, sunflower oil, corn oil, and soybean oil. Monounsaturated fats could be derived from olive oil, canola oil, and peanut oil. Both the poly and mono unsaturated fats have been shown to lower blood cholesterol level. Although these are the better fats, they are still fats, and we should be cautious in their use, especially coconut oil, which is highly saturated fat. The basic rule is to stay away from the saturated fats and trans fats, and moderation in the consumption of unsaturated fats. Eating fish, a lot of vegetables, especially the green leafy ones, and nuts and grains --- a low-fat, low-cholesterol, low-carbohydrate and high-fiber diet --- is the key to better health and longevity.

The main objective of this column is to educate and inspire people live a healthier lifestyle to prevent illnesses and disabilities, and achieve a happier and more productive life. Any diagnosis, recommendation or treatment in our article are general medical information and not intended to be applicable or appropriate for anyone. This column is not a substitute for your physician, who knows your condition well and who is your best ally when it comes to your health.