

# Coconut Oil – Healthy or Hype?

By: [\*Chef Tse\*](#)

Coconut oil has long been hailed by people in the culinary industry as a great alternative to traditional fats. Unlike most oils, coconut oil is solid at room temperature – think nature's version of Crisco. I use it in anything from stir fries to baked goods. But like all fats, I use it in moderation.

There are three main reasons why chefs use coconut oil dishes: flavor, aroma and higher smoke point.

1. **Flavor:** Have you ever tasted pure coconut oil just by itself? If you haven't, try a little taste. It's really quite remarkable. Once inside your mouth, it gives off a very pleasant, smooth taste of coconut and the fat melts slowly on your tongue. When added to stir-fries, it gives the dish a whole new dimension.
2. **Aroma:** Before we even pick up our forks to taste something, our smell sense is activated. The scent wakes up our appetite and makes our brains excited to eat what's coming. Using coconut oil in dishes gives off a nutty coconut smell which doesn't happen when using vegetable or olive oils. Dishes made with coconut oil are simply more appealing to our noses.
3. **Smoke Point:** Chefs throw around the phrase smoke point all the time. Before I became a chef, I had no idea what that meant. Simply put, the smoke point is the temperature at which oil burns. When heated, all oils eventually burn. When they burn, their chemical components break down creating free radicals which are bad for our health and something called acrolein—a chemical that gives a harsh flavor and aroma.

Coconut oil has a lower smoke point than many other oils. For comparison, extra virgin olive oil has a smoke point of around 325 degrees, whereas coconut oil has a smoke point of around 350 degrees. Not a huge difference in my opinion. There are other oils with even higher smoke points such as vegetable (400 degrees), soybean oil (450 degrees), and safflower oil (510 degrees). Lately, coconut oil has been getting a lot of negative media attention. A recent study has confirmed something that we already knew: coconut oil is high in saturated fat, and we know that saturated fat consumed in high doses may have negative health ramifications. Not necessarily a news flash!

Not to allow my affinity for cooking with coconut oil cloud my judgment, I got another perspective. I talked to my colleague [Dr. James Beckerman](#), Medical Director of the Center for Prevention and Wellness at the Providence Heart and Vascular Institute about all this hubbub surrounding coconut oil. As someone who is a champion of healthy lifestyles – he started the Oregon-based Heart to Start program - he has an informed perspective on what constitutes a healthy diet.

Regarding coconut oil, Dr. Beckerman said, “At this time, we do not know whether coconut oil specifically increases the risk of heart disease. True, it has saturated fats which may increase

LDL cholesterol, but coconut oil is also an unprocessed oil which is higher in medium chain triglycerides that may be associated with other lower risk biomarkers.”

“Bottom line,” he says, “moderate usage of coconut oil is unlikely to significantly move your own personal risk as long as you pursue your overall diet with whole foods, plants, lower sugar and modest portion size in mind.”

Although the headlines seem alarming, as a chef and a full-time foodie, my counsel is not to panic. Yes, coconut is a saturated fat, but that doesn’t mean we should label it as a “bad” food. You can enjoy a little coconut oil now and then, so give it a try in one of your next stir-fries and let us know what you think in the comments below.

Oh, and one final reminder from Dr. Beckerman - “Don’t forget to exercise!”

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