

## COCONUT OIL MAY BE “LESS BAD” THAN OTHER OILS, BUT PROBABLY NOT THE BEST. MY SUGGESTION IS TO USE IT SPARINGLY

**Q.** I have started noticing more coconut oil at the grocery store and have heard it is better for you than a lot of other oils. Is that true?

**A.** I've also noticed that coconut oil seems to be catching on these days. Coconut oil is about 90% saturated fat, which is a higher percentage than butter (about 64% saturated fat), beef fat (40%), or even lard (also 40%). Too much saturated fat in the diet is unhealthy because it raises "bad" LDL cholesterol levels, which increases the risk of heart disease. So it would seem that coconut oil would be [bad news for our hearts.](#)

But what's interesting about coconut oil is that it also gives "good" HDL cholesterol a boost. Fat in the diet, whether it's saturated or unsaturated, tends to nudge HDL levels up, but coconut oil seems to be especially potent at doing so.

Saturated fat is divided into various types, based on the number of carbon atoms in the molecule, and about half of the saturated fat in coconut oil is the 12-carbon variety, called lauric acid. That is a higher percentage than in most other oils, and is probably responsible for the unusual HDL effects of coconut oil. But plant-based oils are more than just fats. They contain many antioxidants and other substances, so their overall effects on health can't be predicted just by the [changes in LDL and HDL.](#)

Coconut is a wonderful flavor and there's no problem using coconut oil occasionally. Coconut oil is solid at room temperature, so cooks are experimenting with using it instead of butter or vegetable shortening to make pie crust and other baked goods that require a solid source of fat. And if you're preparing a Thai dish, cooking with coconut oil may be essential.

But, for now, I'd use coconut oil sparingly. Most of the research so far has consisted of short-term studies to examine its effect on cholesterol levels. We don't really know how coconut oil affects heart disease. And I don't think coconut oil is as healthful as vegetable oils like olive oil and soybean oil, which are mainly unsaturated fat and therefore both lower LDL *and* increase HDL. Coconut oil's special HDL-boosting effect may make it "less bad" than the high saturated fat content would indicate, but it's still probably not the best choice among the many available oils to reduce the risk of heart disease.

— Walter C. Willett, M.D.

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