**A Deeper Look at Coconut Oil**

 Just a few short years ago you would be hard pressed to find many coconut products in the grocery store; your options were often limited to either shredded coconut meat or canned coconut milk. More recently, coconut products have been popping up all over grocery store departments - coconut butter and oil, coconut milk, yogurt, and ice cream, coconut flour and sugar, and even coconut water and chips. The list continues to grow in length, as does the list of supposed health claims attributed to coconut consumption. With the amount of product options and health claims, a trip to the grocery store can quickly become overwhelming.

 So what are the facts? What health claims have been proven? What products should you choose? Let's take a deeper look at coconut oil, so you can make an informed decision the next time you’re out at the store.

**Claim #1**

*Coconut oil promotes heart health*

**Fact**

There are many claims about the different ways coconut oil can contribute to a healthy heart, however the amount of research done on the topic is minimal. As such, there is not enough evidence to support these ‘heart-healthy’ claims.

**Claim #2**

*Coconut oil can prevent Alzheimer’s disease, or help treat it*

**Fact**

So far there has been minimal research to both support and counter these claims. The premise for the claim that coconut oil can prevent Alzheimer’s disease stems from the idea that the brain has difficulty in using sugar for energy in Alzheimer patients. When coconut oil breaks down, it produces a form of energy the brain can use, which has led to the development of this theory. To date, there is little evidence to support this theory.

**Claim #3**

*Coconut oil has anti-inflammatory properties*

**Fact**

Coconut meat has been shown to have anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, but these are removed when coconut is refined into the oil. For this reason, it is more nutritious to eat the coconut meat, since it contains these beneficial properties, as well as whole food components like fibre. Coconut meat contains nutrients and compounds that may be beneficial to reducing inflammation, but only when consumed with a balanced, whole-food diet.

**Key Considerations**

Thorough research on coconut is limited, as it is relatively new to the marketplace. Coconut oil has a high concentration of saturated fat and is limited in other nutrients. Eating the whole coconut gives a much richer source of vitamins, minerals, fibre and other beneficial nutrients. Rather than coconut oil being a ‘superfood’, the research to date suggests that coconut products, in combination with a diet rich in whole, fibrous foods, can promote health.

A point often missed in the claims regarding coconut is its price; coconut oils are often twice as expensive as their other vegetable oil counterparts. This price discrepancy is in part due to the greater food miles associated with coconut oil. For example:

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| **Oil** | **Average Price** |
| Extra Virgin Coconut Oil | $3.00/100 ml |
| Extra Virgin Olive Oil | $1.35/100 ml |
| \*Information taken from Save On Foods & Stongs Market |

**Take Home Messages**

There are many claims made that coconut oil is a health miracle. While there seems to be health benefits of consuming a whole food, plant-based diet that can include coconut meat, the research on the healthful properties of the oil itself is limited. Many of the beneficial properties of coconut are lost in the refining process when the oil is made.

Olive oil, on the other hand, is an affordable, nutrient dense oil that is rich in anti-inflammatory agents, and can provide long term health benefits. Additionally, olive oil has a larger body of research to back its health claims.

Finally, coconut oil has to travel a great distance to our stores, leaving a large environmental impact. Locally grown crops like canola and some olive oils are high in nutrients and low in food miles.

**What does this all mean?**

You can still keep that jar of coconut oil you have for your favourite dishes and baked goods, but perhaps reach for the unsaturated oils for more frequent cooking!

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