

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Tropical Oils

Does 'tropical oil' make you think of suntan lotion and white sandy beaches?

The right kind could make you smell of coconuts, that's true. But various tropical oils are showing up more frequently on food labels these days. Have you noticed more coconut oil, palm oil, palm kernel oil, even fractionated palm kernel oil on ingredient lists?

It all started as the FDA realized the risks that come with eating *trans* fats. Most oils go rancid easily. So foods that might sit on a grocery shelf for awhile, things like cake mixes, candy, crackers and cookies, can start to smell like old paint if they contain vegetable oils. One solution is to partially hydrogenate the oils. That makes them more saturated, but it also produces some *trans* fats. When the FDA required that *trans* fats be counted on food labels because of their health risks, manufacturers started looking for other fats. They want vegetable oils that are not super expensive and that have a lot of saturated fat, so they don't need to be hydrogenated.

The answers are tropical oils! Oils from coconuts and palms have a lot more saturated fat than other vegetable oils. Coconut oil is about 86% saturated. It even smells good too! Palm oil is made from palm fruit. It's about 50% saturated. Palm kernel oil is pressed from the nuts of oil palms. It's almost 80% saturated fat. Palm kernel oil is sometimes separated, or fractionated, to remove the unsaturated fat and leave an almost pure saturated fat.

The more saturated a fat is, the more slowly it will go rancid. They are a good

choice to use in something like a cake mix that might be on the shelf for several months before it is used. More saturated fats are also more solid. They don't melt at room temperature. So these fats are often used in candies, cookies and things like granola or energy bars with chocolate-flavored coatings.

All of that sounds pretty good. But there might be problems too. All these oils need to be refined before they can be used. Palm kernel oil before refining is dark red and has a rather strong flavor and odor. We wouldn't be able to hide it in a candy bar. When oils are refined they lose their native antioxidants and vitamins. And with or without refining, no decent medical studies have shown that coconut oil will boost your immunity, burn more calories for you, fix your arthritis or digestion, or prevent heart disease. Sorry, but those claims are just a lot of advertising.

And while they are vegetable fats, the jury is still out on whether they act like liquid vegetable oils or more like solid animal fats in our bodies. Some studies have found that diets high in palm or palm kernel oil will raise cholesterol levels, but others didn't see that effect. In people with high cholesterol levels, coconut oil made it go higher. But in people with normal cholesterol it had no effect. It seems that the genetic background of the people in the studies, their weight and exercise levels, and what else is in their diets can make a difference in what the fats do to them. We don't understand yet how they work or who they might harm or benefit.

What is true of all these oils is that they have calories, the same number of calories as other fats. So they will put inches on our waists just as fast as lard or beef suet will. The important thing is to eat a balanced diet. Some fat is necessary, it certainly tastes good, but too much is a problem. There's no magic in tropical fats.

Here's a way to spice up your carrots for dinner tonight. Use a chutney as hot or sweet and mild as your family likes. Toasting the coconut gives it more flavor, and will make your kitchen smell great.

Coconut Carrots

1 16-oz pkg frozen baby carrots, thawed	2 Tbsp margarine or oil
2 Tbsp honey	2 Tbsp chutney
1 tsp prepared mustard	¼ cup grated coconut

Toast coconut by putting on baking sheet for 10 min in 325°F oven. Combine carrots, margarine, honey, chutney and mustard in large skillet. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally until heated through. Transfer to serving dish. Sprinkle toasted coconut over carrots to serve. Serves 6.