

## **PENNY SAVER NEWS**

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### Should You Go Coco-nutty?

Coconuts are definitely on the up-swing these days. From coconut water to coconut oil and every part in between, coconuts are high in foodie awareness. We used to be told that coconuts had all kinds of bad fat and we should avoid them. Now we're being told they'll cure all our illnesses, from Alzheimer's disease to weight loss. But you can probably guess my question – how much evidence is there behind all the fantastic claims? Not counting TV-celebrity doctor's claims, the research is really awfully slim.

Many of these claims are based on the fact that coconut fat is not like most other vegetable fats. Most plants make unsaturated fats, oils that stay liquid. But coconut oil has a lot of saturated fat, even more than butter or lard. If you put it in the refrigerator it will get hard, so hard that you have to chip chunks off it. That was why for years we thought coconut oil would be bad for our hearts.

Now, as research continues into foods, what's in foods, and how foods affect us, we have new information. It turns out that the saturated fat in coconut oil is different. It is saturated, but most of the individual fats are smaller. That's probably why it gets so hard, they can really pack together tightly. And, it seems that these little fats don't act the same way that bigger fats do in our bodies.

Bigger fats include those in milk and cheese as well as in beef and pork. Most medical studies agree that the bigger saturated fats from milk and meat are more likely to increase our cholesterol levels. But the smaller fats from coconuts don't seem to have much effect on our cholesterol. There are a couple of studies that even say coconut fat will lower our cholesterol, especially the LDL or 'bad' kind. But others saw an opposite effect. In fact, some studies found coconut oil raised cholesterol.

A big part of the answer to this disagreement probably depends on what kind of fat the people were eating before they changed to coconut. If they were using healthier oils such as olive or canola, changing to coconut made their LDL go up. If they changed from butter or lard to coconut, it stayed the same or went down a little bit.

So whether coconut oil helps you, hurts you or makes no difference to your heart and cholesterol depends on more than just coconut oil. At this point, many doctors say that we really

don't know enough to say whether it's good or bad, or who it might help and who it might harm. Stay tuned, but no need yet to switch to coconut oil.

And, it still has all the calories (120 per tablespoon) that other fats and oils have. So don't expect any weight loss miracles from coconut oil. What happens in test tubes or rats and what happens in human bodies can be very different. So far, there are no decent studies that really show it helps with weight loss. The same is true for the other health claims. There's a book out claiming it helps Alzheimer's patients. But that is based on one person's story, not on research on many people. If you were a clone of that one person it might help you too. But if you're not, then chances are good that it won't do you much good either.

If you like the flavor of sweet, nutty oil in your food, and can afford to buy it, go ahead and use coconut oil. Don't keep it in the refrigerator. If it gets hard, just warming it in a pan of hot water will soften it again. You can use the oil like other oils or margarines, from cooking to spreading on toast. To substitute it for shortening, use less. Instead of 1 cup of shortening, use just  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of coconut oil. And if you don't care for the flavor, or the price, don't bother with coconut oil.

Here's a different way to serve shrimp, or chicken if you prefer. If you don't have coconut oil use margarine or oil. Serve it over cooked brown rice. Enjoy!

#### Curried Shrimp with Apples

1 medium onion, chopped	2 stalks celery, chopped
1 medium red or green bell pepper, chopped	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup coconut oil or margarine
2 medium apples, sliced	1 tsp all-purpose flour
1 packet no-salt chicken bouillon powder	$\frac{3}{4}$ tsp curry powder
$\frac{3}{4}$ pound peeled shrimp, or cubed chicken	$\frac{3}{4}$ cup water

Sauté onion, celery and bell pepper in oil or margarine for 2 minutes. Stir in apples, sauté until crisp-tender. Combine flour, curry powder and bouillon powder, sprinkle over vegetables. Stir in water until smooth. Add shrimp or chicken. Bring to boil, reduce heat and simmer until shrimp is pink or chicken is done and sauce is thickened. Serve over rice. Garnish with shredded coconut if desired. Serves 4.

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