By Dr. Ramona Warren

Recently I was talking with a friend who is a well-trained, excellent chef. We got on the subject of coconut oil and whether it is truly healthy, since coconut is very high in saturated fat. I have been a strong proponent of coconut oil for years and use it quite often as a cooking oil, as well as in recipes and protein shakes. I have great respect for my friend and his knowledge regarding food, so I did some research to uncover the truth.

According to the USDA National Nutrient Database, one tablespoon of coconut oil contains 117 calories, 0 grams of protein, 13.6 grams of fat (11.8 saturated, 0.8 monounsaturated and 0.2 polyunsaturated), 0 grams of carbohydrate, 0 grams of fiber and 0 grams of sugar. This nutrient profile is similar to the profile of most oils, except for the higher saturated fat content.

There are two basic types of fats, saturated and unsaturated. Typically, the healthier fats are **unsaturated** fats, which are derived from nuts, seeds, avocados and vegetables. These fats are beneficial to add to our diets because they do not raise or lower LDL or HDL cholesterol levels.

**Saturated** fats are found in animal meats and products, such as cream, cheese, butter, and whole milk. Saturated fats are also found in tropical oils such as coconut and palm oil. 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. However, coconut oil is different in that it also raises “good” HDL cholesterol. Higher levels of HDL help decrease the risk for heart disease.

The structure of fat in coconut oil also differs from the traditional saturated fat found in animal products. Coconut oil has an unusually high amount of medium-chain fatty acids or triglycerides (MCFAs or MCTs), which are harder for our bodies to convert into stored fat and easier to burn off than the long-chain fatty acids or triglycerides found in most saturated fats.

Given these differences, numerous studies have found that coconut oil offers several health benefits. Certainly more studies could be done to better understand coconut oil, and it would be best if the same type of coconut oil was studied, since health benefits vary based on the amount of processing. However, here are some of the more interesting findings:

1. One study in the *Journal of Medicinal Food* (2007) determined coconut oil useful in treating fungal infections, specifically drug-resistant Candida. If you suffer with Candida you can try adding a teaspoon to your protein shakes or hot tea.
2. Another study found putting coconut oil on wounds can help prevent infection.
3. One study found coconut oil to be a beneficial skin moisturizer, especially for dry, rough, itchy skin.
4. A randomized, double blind trial conducted in 2009 showed women who supplemented daily with 30 mL of coconut oil had improvements in blood lipid profiles and a reduction in waist circumference.
5. A 2004 study conducted by Reger et al., demonstrated supplementing with medium chain triglycerides (found in coconut oil) improved paragraph recall in patients with Alzheimer’s disease.
6. A prospective study conducted in 2014 showed that virgin coconut oil used during chemotherapy helped reduce the side effects of chemotherapy (less fatigue, sleep difficulties and loss of appetite) in breast cancer patients.
7. An open-pilot study conducted in 2011 revealed that supplementing with virgin coconut oil was effective for reducing visceral (belly) fat in men.

There are two main types of coconut oil: refined and unrefined. The refined coconut oil is produced from dried coconuts rather than fresh coconuts and has been bleached and deodorized so the coconut flavor and aroma are removed. This product is a cheaper oil than the unrefined coconut oil, and may also be hydrogenated or fractionated. It is best to avoid any coconut oil that has been processed, since the more processed a food is, the less healthy it usually is. Unrefined coconut oil is referred to as “virgin” or “raw” oil. It is produced from fresh coconuts and has a mild coconut taste and slight aroma. This is the type of coconut oil you want to use to get the most health benefits.

For several years I have chosen to use coconut oil in my diet, but in moderation (there will never be a single “superfood” that will maintain our health). My top three choices are Nutiva Virgin Coconut Oil, Tropical Traditions Virgin Coconut Oil and Artisana Virgin Coconut Oil. All of these can easily be found on Amazon.

So, the answer to the question of whether coconut oil is beneficial to our health is not a simple “yes” or “no.” Incorporating unrefined, virgin coconut oil into our diets can offer benefits, but we should focus the majority of our efforts on eating a nutritious whole food diet and practicing healthy lifestyle habits in order to reap the most rewards.