

# Things You Probably Didn't Know About Coconut Oil

An Interview with Bruce Fife, CN, ND

*When it comes to personal health, there are times when you are truly enlightened by certain professionals in the field. My interview with Bruce Fife, ND, CN, was one of those times. A naturopathic physician and certified nutritionist, he has exposed the truth about coconut oil to the general public and revealed the marketing strategies that gave coconut oil such a bad name.*

by Rachale Baseley

**HL** *When did you first become interested in coconut oil? Why?*

**BF** Like everyone else I used to believe that coconut oil was an artery clogging saturated fat. What started me thinking differently was an experience I had several years ago. I was in a meeting with a group of nutritionists and one of the members of the group stated that coconut oil was one of the good fats, that it didn't cause heart disease, and that it had many health benefits. At first I was shocked. This went against everything I'd heard in the past. This nutritionist, however, backed up her statement and referred to studies that showed that coconut oil had many important nutritional and medical uses. I learned that coconut oil, in one form or another, was used in hospital parenteral formulas to nourish seriously ill patients. It was an important ingredient in infant formulas and was recommended for people with digestive or nutritional problems. I began to wonder; if coconut oil is so bad, why is it fed to hospital patients and newborn babies and recommended for those with digestive concerns? It didn't make sense. Was coconut oil the evil villain or not? I had to find the answer.

I began looking. I went to the library and I went on the Internet, but I couldn't find anything specifically on the health aspects of coconut oil. At the time, there wasn't any. I did find lots of articles on oils and nutrition and most of them would mention coconut oil, but they didn't go into any detail. All they said was "coconut oil is a saturated fat and causes heart disease." I saw that statement repeated over and over again, but not a single one of these authors ever backed it up with any facts, any figures, or any references to the medical literature. It became obvious to me that none of these doctors

and nutritionists who were making this statement really knew anything at all about coconut oil. All they were doing is simply repeating what someone else had said, who in turn, repeated someone else, and on and on.

I realized that if I was ever going to learn the truth about coconut oil I wasn't going to find it in the books and magazine articles currently available because apparently none of these authors knew anything about it. I knew that if I was going to find the truth I needed to go to the research. And that's what I did. I started digging through the medical literature and looked up everything related to coconut oil. When I did this, I found hundreds of articles. And what I learned shocked me!

I discovered why coconut oil, in one form or another, was used in hospital and baby formulas and why it was recommended for those with digestive problems. I discovered it had many important nutritional and medical applications. I also learned that there was no truth in the belief that coconut oil causes or even contributes to heart disease. In fact, I learned that if you want to protect yourself from heart disease you should be using coconut oil.

I began using coconut oil myself and recommending it to others. I've seen it help people with hemorrhoids, cancer, diabetes, psoriasis, gallbladder disease, bladder infections, flu, and many other health problems. After learning about coconut oil and seeing what it can do, I realized that nobody except a few researchers knew the truth about this miraculous oil. I felt an obligation to share this knowledge with everyone else. So I wrote the book *The Coconut Oil Miracle* (formerly titled *The Healing Miracles of Coconut Oil*).

**HL** *At Healthy Living magazine we consider you one of the world's leading experts on coconut oil. What research have you done in this field, and what have your experiences taught you?*

**BF** Most of my research has been investigating what other researchers have discovered about coconut oil and fats and oils in general and organizing and condensing it into a form that is easy-to-read and understand by the general public. Medical studies are written in a language that is very difficult for most people to understand unless they have medical training. This causes a lot of confusion and misinterpretation and is one of the reasons why there is so much confusion and misunderstanding in nutrition and health.

I have the opportunity of seeing how coconut oil affects people in a clinical

setting. I see people all the time who use coconut oil and witness how it affects their lives. Some have experienced incredible improvement from a wide variety of health problems. I am continually amazed at the conditions in which coconut oil seems to be able to help. Many of these people have suffered with health problems for years. After incorporating coconut oil into their diets and using it on their skin the problems often diminish or completely disappear.

One of my goals is to tell everyone who will listen about the coconut oil miracle. Most people are still in the dark about it. If you go to the average person on the street and ask them about coconut oil, they knew very little, including health care professionals, doctors, nutritionists; they really don't know much because they haven't studied it. Most of the education doctors receive after graduating from medical school is provided by the pharmaceutical industry and, therefore, is very biased. They don't hear about natural, nutritional approaches. Sometimes doctors have to be educated by their patients.

**HL** *Can you explain why as a nation we stopped using coconut oil? Does the promotion of polyunsaturated soybean oil produced by American farmers play a role in this?*

**BF** Oh yes. And this is something that people need to know about. The reason people think of heart disease when anyone mentions coconut oil doesn't have anything to do with science, and doesn't have anything to do with the fact, but has everything to do with marketing and money. Back in the early and mid-1980s, people were concerned that saturated fats could raise cholesterol levels. The soybean industry realized this was a perfect opportunity to make a profit. They reasoned that if they could convince people that all saturated fats were bad and caused heart disease people would eat more vegetable oil. So the soybean industry spent millions in an anti-saturated fat and anti-tropical oils publicity campaign. Special interest groups such as the Center for Science in the Public Interest joined in and started producing alarming news stories about the dangers of saturated fats. They invented the term "artery clogging fat" in reference to coconut oil. Because of the media blitz it didn't take long before everyone believed coconut oil was an artery clogging fat. People are still duped by the soybean industry's attack on coconut oil. Many authors, too lazy to do their own research, still parrot the biased viewpoints produced by these groups. I'm trying to change this by providing accurate information so that people can know the truth.

**HL** *Do you use coconut oil yourself? How do you use it and how often?*

**BL** I use it all the time and in every imaginable way. We use it in all of our cooking and our baking. My wife uses it to make bread. She says her bread comes out better, it's moist and light. We make whole wheat bread, and it has become famous here, thanks to its soft, fluffy, delicious taste and texture.

At times I use coconut oil as a supplement and take it by the spoonful. The type I use tastes delicious so I don't mind taking by the spoon. I also add it to a bowl of oatmeal, in order to get the oil in my diet. You can spread it on bread, or you can use half-and-half butter and coconut oil, I put it in soups, again just to get the benefit of the oil. You can add it to a wide variety of foods.

I put it on my skin too. It is excellent for the skin; if you want to become a believer in the health benefits of coconut oil, just start using it on your skin. Dry, hard, discolored, and flaky skin will transform into soft, smooth healthy looking skin within weeks.

**HL** *How is it that not all saturated fats are unhealthy? Tell us about medium-chain fatty acids.*

**BF** Fats and oils are composed of molecules called fatty acids. Three fatty acids joined together form a triglyceride molecule. Some fatty acids are smaller than others. Medium-chain fatty acids are smaller than long-chain fatty acids. Likewise medium-chain triglycerides are smaller than long-chain triglycerides. The size of these molecules is very important because our bodies process and metabolize each fat differently depending on its size. Most all of the fats and oils in our diet are composed of long-chain fatty acids, whether they're unsaturated or saturated. There are only a few dietary sources of medium-chain fatty acids, the primary source being tropical oils, particularly palm kernel and coconut oils. That's why coconut oil is different from other oils and it the secret to many of its healing properties.

Because the medium-chain triglycerides are smaller than the long-chain triglycerides that are in most fats and oils, they're digested quicker. In fact, they don't even need pancreatic digestive enzymes to break them down. By the time they enter the intestinal tract, they are completely broken down into free fatty acids, while long-chain triglycerides still need the digestive enzymes to break them down. What's important here is that the long-chain

fatty acids, when they're finally broken down, will be absorbed through the intestinal wall. From there, they are packaged into lipoproteins and released into the bloodstream. So the long-chain fatty acids go into the digestive tract and then into the bloodstream. As they circulate in the bloodstream they supply the fat that collects in fat cells and the fat that collects in artery walls.

With medium-chain fatty triglycerides in coconut oil the process is different. They are quickly digested, so pancreatic enzymes are not needed. By the time they enter the intestinal tract they are completely broken down into fatty acids. Because of this, they are absorbed immediately into the portal vein, and sent directly to the liver. In the liver they are used as a source of fuel to produce energy. Therefore, they bypass the lipoprotein stage, and they don't circulate in the bloodstream to the degree that other fats do. Consequently, they do not supply the fat that collects in fat cells or the fat that collects in artery walls. They produce energy not body fat and not arterial plaque.

**HL** *What conditions does coconut oil help to treat?*

**BF** Topically it seems to be able to benefit almost any skin condition. I wouldn't say that it can cure every type of skin condition, but I've seen a wide variety of conditions improve-and sometimes completely vanish-with the use of coconut oil. It can help speed healing of cuts and burns; there's a long tradition in the islands of using coconut oil as a sunscreen. It is great for fungal infections such as ringworm and athlete's foot. People tell me how they have used medicated treatments without success, but when they use coconut oil it does the job.

There is evidence that coconut oil helps prevent osteoporosis. One of the interesting things about coconut oil is that it helps improve nutrient absorption. It improves absorption of minerals such as calcium and magnesium and thus aid in preventing osteoporosis. Also, it increases absorption of some of the B vitamins, the fat-soluble vitamins: A, D, E, K, beta-carotene, and some amino acids. Because of it is easily digested, provides a quick and easy source of nutrition, and improves absorption of other nutrients coconut oil has been recommended in the treatment of malnutrition.

Coconut oil has many other uses. Research has shown it can be useful in the treatment and prevention of obesity. A lot of research is current being done in this area. Studies show it may be helpful in preventing liver disease,

kidney disease, Crohn's disease, cancer and many infectious illnesses such as the flu, herpes, bladder infections, and candida, to mention just a few. Studies are now being done to test its effectiveness against serious illness such as AIDS and SARS. Preliminary results have been very promising.

**HL** *We have recently written in depth about chronic fatigue syndrome. How can coconut oil help with this debilitating and often misunderstood illness?*

**BF** It helps in a couple of ways. One way it helps is due to its antimicrobial effects, it can destroy organisms in the body that may be sapping the body's strength and contributing to the condition. Another way is that because the medium-chain fatty acids in coconut oil are used by the body to produce energy rather than body fat, it produces a surge in energy. With those two combined, it can be of benefit.

**HL** *It appears that coconut oil can help with a whole host of conditions. What would you say to those skeptics who say that it must be too good to be true?*

**BF** Coconut oil has so many benefits that some people may think that it can cure anything, but it's not a cure-all. It has some specific health benefits that are truly remarkable, but it can't cure everything, and so people shouldn't expect it to.

**HL** *You have written several books on promoting good health, one of the latest being *The Coconut Oil Miracle* (Avery 2004). In this you detail the positive health benefits of coconut oil. Can you tell us a bit more about the book and why you felt the need to write it?*

**BF** As I mentioned earlier, after learning about all the benefits we've talked about, such as the antimicrobial effects, the way coconut oil aids in digestion, nutrient absorption, and weight loss, I was amazed. I realized that few people were aware of this, thanks to the popular misconception that coconut oil causes heart disease. I wanted to share this knowledge with the rest of the world and the only way I knew how to do this was to write a book.

**HL** *Would you recommend the addition of coconut oil to everyone's diet? Can we all benefit from its use?*

**BF** Yes, absolutely. I recommend coconut oil to everybody and anybody who will listen.

This article was adapted and condensed from a two-part series published in *The Doctor's Prescription for Healthy Living*, Freedom Press, Inc, 1013 Centre Road #301, Wilmington, DE 19805.

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