BNF answers some common questions on coconut oil

**Why has coconut oil become so popular?**

Over the last few years there has been a flurry of popular media articles dedicated to the benefits of coconut oil. From being reported as a wonder cosmetic product for hair and skin (suggesting it is good for the outside), it seems to be increasingly suggested that we eat coconut oil for a variety of health reasons (referring to benefits for the inside). Food bloggers have been encouraging us to use it in cooking and baking, and the food industry has increased the number of coconut products available, and started including coconut oil as a main fat in some manufactured products. Claimed benefits have included everything from weight loss to immune system and memory boosting effects. Coconut oil has even been hailed as a treatment for conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease.

So is coconut oil really good for you and is there any evidence that supports the benefits being claimed for it?

BNF has produced this FAQ factsheet to help you make some sense of the information on coconut oil. We will start by looking at one of the most widely reported claims for coconut oil – that it’s good for weight loss.

**Can coconut oil help me to lose weight?**

The fats in coconut oil have been described as ‘medium chain’ and it has been suggested that these types of fats may help people lose weight. There is weak evidence from a small number of studies that if these fats are consumed instead of other types of fats in a restricted calorie diet, this can lead to small amounts of weight loss. However it is important to remember that the amount of medium chain fats in coconut oil is actually very small. There is better evidence for other ways to lose weight.

Do remember that fats and oils provide the same number of calories (9kcal/g) regardless of where they come from. This means that too much of any type of fat can encourage weight gain.
**Is coconut oil the best oil to use?**

Coconut oil is very high in saturated fat. UK and major international health organisations have concluded that there is a link between high saturated fat intakes, raised blood cholesterol and increased risk of heart disease. This has led organisations around the world to advise that we should be reducing saturated fats in our diet and replacing them with small amounts of unsaturated fats. Studies have shown that replacing saturated fat with unsaturated fat in the diet reduces blood cholesterol and lowers the risk of heart disease and stroke. Unsaturated fats are found in avocados, nuts, seeds and oily fish as well as in oils like rapeseed and olive oil.

You may have also heard that coconut oil, particularly the extra virgin variety, contains small amounts of plant compounds called polyphenols which could be beneficial for our health. These compounds are not unique to coconut oil and are found in larger quantities in a variety of other foods which should be making up a large part of our diet such as fruits, vegetables and wholegrains. Such foods also provide us with vitamins, minerals and fibre and are a lot lower in calories and saturated fat than coconut oil.

**I have read that coconut oil is good for conditions like Alzheimer’s disease and it can boost my immune system. What does the science show?**

There is no scientific evidence that coconut oil enhances brain function, but we do know that good dietary patterns are important for brain health. Such patterns include oily fish, wholegrains and plenty of fruit and vegetables.

The popular support for the use of coconut oil in Alzheimer’s disease is based on anecdotal evidence (personal accounts) where people have reported seeing some improvement after giving coconut oil to relatives. But anecdotal evidence is not science – and there is typically a large placebo effect (where a condition improves simply because someone has the expectation that something will be helpful). When making treatment decisions, it is important that there is robust scientific evidence to show that a treatment is both safe to use and beneficial. In this case, this information is not available.

There is also no good scientific evidence that coconut oil can boost your immune system. This claim is largely based on the fact that one of the fats found in coconut oil is also present in breast milk!

**Is coconut oil a healthy choice?**

Overall, while it might be nice to put on your skin, there is no strong scientific evidence to support health benefits from eating coconut oil. If you like the taste of coconut oil it can be included in the diet, but in small amounts and not very often. Just two tablespoons of coconut oil contains more than our reference intake (the approximate maximum amount that should be included in a healthy, balanced diet each day) of 20 g saturated fat.