

The good oil?

Coconut oil is being pitched as the next big thing – but does it really deliver on all its big claims? **Kate Browne** finds out

While coconut oil isn't a new product, the media has recently been awash with stories extolling its virtues – not to mention the tsunami of celebrities who suddenly swear by it (see opposite). Websites are full of converts who are adding it to smoothies, drizzling it over salads and even downing it by the spoonful in a quest for better health.

Some of the (many) claims about coconut oil include that it:

- controls sugar cravings

- controls weight
- eases digestion
- boosts your metabolism
- provides stress relief and boosts immunity.

One CHOICE staffer was even told recently in a beauty salon that applying virgin coconut oil would help the hair in her eyebrows grow back!

But before you head to the health food section of your supermarket for your own jar of miracle oil, CHOICE found out what the experts have to say about this year's latest dietary trend.

What is it?

Coconut oil is extracted from the flesh of the coconut. It has a slight nutty flavour and works well in both savoury and sweet dishes. It's particularly popular in vegan cooking and can replace dairy products to make pastry and creamy desserts. It has a very high smoking point when cooking as well as a long shelf life.

Nuts about coconuts

Melbourne-based dietitian Zoe Nicholson, from private consultancy Figureate, says she's seeing an increase in clients who are asking about coconut oil and cooking with it. "Some believe the claims about weight loss, boosting the immune system and fighting various diseases, and others are using it because everyone is talking

about it and shops are selling it as the new best thing."

Dr Kellie Bilinski, an Accredited Practising Dietitian and spokesperson for the Dietitians Association of Australia, believes the increased interest in coconut oil has been driven by those who are following sugar-free and paleo diets.

Don't believe the hype

Despite its popularity, both our experts warn that while using coconut oil may have a few health benefits, none of the claims above have yet been properly researched or proven.





But they eat it
in Asia...

The fact that coconut oil is so high in saturated fat needs to be considered in the context of a Western diet, says Nicholson. While much Asian cuisine uses coconut in many forms, coconut is/ was one of only a few sources of saturated fat. "Traditionally they don't tuck into cheese, butter, chocolate, bacon or fast food – just to name a few common sources of saturated fat in the Western diet."

A healthier alternative

- Most plant-based oils are healthy, good alternatives, and are likely to cost less as well.
- Rice bran and peanut oil are great for stir-frying, while extra-virgin olive oil is good for cooking on moderate heat and for salad dressings. Canola and sunflower oils are also suitable for cooking.

Anatomy of a trend

When it comes to any kind of trend, like that of coconut oil, there's usually a catalyst. Consumer psychologist and adman Adam Ferrier wrote his PhD on what makes things cool. His number one finding was that it's impossible for something to be cool without cool people using it.

Henrik Vejlggaard is the author of *Anatomy of a Trend*, which examines the lifecycle of the trend process. The former academic and sociologist outlines a number of key elements he believes contribute to the development of a trend. According to Vejlggaard, trends tend to start in major global cities (he cites New York, LA, Milan, Tokyo and London as examples) and are kicked off by trendsetters – a particular personality type who are key influencers in their social groups and are open to change. The tastes of these key influencers are often picked up quickly in major cities and adopted by other influential groups such as designers and celebrities. There is then a cycle of observing and copying

by the wider population with the help of the media.

And when it comes to extolling the wonders of coconut oil, plenty of cool people are getting in on the act, from Angelina Jolie to popular Australian anti-sugar advocate and media personality Sarah Wilson. But the oil's most prominent proponent is arguably supermodel Miranda Kerr, who she says she eats it by the spoonful every day, as well as using it in her hair and skincare routine.

Added to that already potent mix, are preliminary studies showing there may be some evidence of benefits (which may be misinterpreted or generalised into pop science). And it's not long before the product is trickling down from a global phenomenon to the local supermarket shelves and reaching saturation point.



THE CONS

- All coconut oil, whether virgin or refined, is high in saturated fat (higher than butter) so it is considered a solid fat. One tablespoon of coconut oil provides 490kJ / 117 calories, 13.6g total fat (including 11.8g of saturated fat), no protein or carbohydrates, and only trace amounts of a few nutrients.
- One of the main concerns surrounds the type of fat. The fatty acids found in coconut oil raise LDL (the bad cholesterol), just like foods with other saturated fats, such as butter. And while coconut may also raise HDL (the good cholesterol) it doesn't do it as much as foods high in unsaturated fats do.
- While coconut oil doesn't contain

cholesterol, it also doesn't stack up against most other plant-based oils. Canola, corn, safflower, sunflower, soybean, flaxseed, grape seed and extra-virgin olive oil all contain significantly less saturated fat.

- The fact that coconut oil is so high in saturated fat needs to be considered in the context of a Western diet, which is typically already high. Cancer Council Australia recommends reducing or avoiding a diet high in saturated fats.
- It's expensive! At around twice the price of olive oil, coconut oil hasn't yet been shown to offer health benefits greater than extra virgin olive oil. Extra virgin olive oil has proven heart health benefits,

whereas the evidence for coconut oil is limited.

THE PROS

- Coconut oil does have some antioxidant properties, potentially because of plant nutrients called phenolic compounds.
- It's an unusual blend of short- and medium-chain fatty acids not seen in other saturated fats, which may offer some health benefits. However, research is yet to confirm this.
- While coconut oil can be part of a healthy diet, it's not necessary for optimal nutrition. Most plant oils provide health benefits, particularly extra virgin olive oil, which has proven health benefits. ■