**Why I Like Coconut for Babies and Lactating Moms**

Here are 3 possible benefits of eating coconut that may surprise you.

1. Assists in weight loss
2. Increases energy
3. Boosts immunity

**How did we have it all wrong?**

It was only a few years ago that the food police vilified coconut oil as a major culprit in the rise of obesity and heart disease in the US. Now many of these nutritionists and doctors are back peddling. It turns out that most of the coconut oil they were looking at was hydrogenated. Hydrogenated oils can wreak havoc on cardiovascular health. Food manufacturers love them for their ability to prolong shelf-life and because they are cheap, compared to unprocessed fats such as butter and virgin coconut oil.

The saturated fat in coconut raises both HDL cholesterol levels and LDL cholesterol in the blood, and is not thought to negatively affect the ratio of the two. Experts now understand that the ratio is a better indicator of risk for heart disease than the LDL (sometimes called the “bad” cholesterol) levels, or the sum of HDL and LDL levels.

**Weight loss benefit?**

The jars of virgin coconut oil that fill the shelves in health food stores are primarily saturated fat, but on-going research since the late 1990’s shows that its unique properties can help with weight loss. Scientists have learned that the medium-chain fatty acids in coconut bypass the liver and are shuttled into the mitochondria of cells where they’re converted to energy, versus being stored as fat. The existing studies are not large enough to be conclusive, but even if it doesn’t assist in weight loss, the mild, slightly nutty and vanillin flavor of coconut oil tastes delicious and is a great alternative to butter for those who are sensitive to dairy.

**Immune booster for you and baby?**

Coconut oil is high in lauric acid which is also very high in breast milk. Lauric acid fights against viruses and bacteria. If mother nature could weigh in here, she might add that coconuts grow in the warm, wet tropical climates where bacteria and viruses thrive, so it’s not surprising that the indigenous people in places such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and India- where most of the world’s coconuts are grown- eat a lot of coconut.

**Which coconut products should I use and how? Are there any I should avoid?**

Canned coconut milk is made from grated mature coconut. In the U.S. it’s sold in cans and often has a layer of thick cream on top and a watery milky substance underneath; use both. The milk and cream can both be added to cooked foods for a smooth puree for baby. This type of coconut milk is also traditionally used for making tasty curries. Try blending coconut milk with roasted sweet potato or winter squash, lamb, or a variety of vegetables. Look for Native Forest brand on your grocer’s shelf; it is the only organic, BPA-free canned coconut milk available.

Refrigerated coconut milk is thinned and blended with water for a consistency more similar to cow’s milk. Manufacturers fortify it with vitamins A and D, and other vitamins and minerals, making it a milk alternative for those allergic or sensitive to dairy. So Delicious makes an Unsweetened, Original and Vanilla version. If you are allergic or sensitive to dairy, I recommend switching to a refrigerated coconut milk over almond, rice and other milk alternatives. Mix the Unsweetened variety with the Original or Vanilla to cut down on sugar.

Coconut oil is the fat from the coconut and is solid at room temperature. Look for organic virgin coconut oil. Use this as you would butter; spread on whole grain toast and cut into squares as an alternative to O’s cereal. Add a couple of teaspoons to cooked rice, and steamed warm vegetables; use it instead of canola oil for stir-frying, or melt it and use it for roasting vegetables. It has a higher smoke point than butter or olive oil so it won’t burn over high heat.

Coconut water is made from the liquid of young, immature coconuts. It does not contain fat and is high in potassium and electrolytes making it a great recovery drink for athletes or exercising moms. Nursing moms who struggle to keep hydrated may enjoy its sweet taste.

**Are there any other uses for coconut oil?**

Add 1-2 tsp to oatmeal at the end of cooking. Stir in cut-up banana for natural sweetness, and a sprinkle of cinnamon or nutmeg.

Add 1-2 tsp to whole roasted Japanese sweet potatoes. Their skin is reddish and the flesh is yellow, dense and sweeter than the traditional orange varieties. Alternatively, melt coconut oil and toss it with cut up sweet potato, salt and pepper and roast at 400 degrees for 40 minutes or until soft.

Melt 1 Tbs in a skillet and add 1 large chopped onion. Saute until translucent. Add to steamed quinoa or blend with cooked meat and veggies.

Moisturize: Take a teaspoon in the palm of your hand so that it softens. Use this as a natural moisturizer on your own or on your baby’s skin. Once softened, it glides on and absorbs easily.

**Virginia Watkins** completed her post-graduate studies in Nutrition Education at Bauman College in Berkeley, CA. While an undergraduate at Duke University, she studied French cooking in Montpellier, France, continuing an early fascination with food. She is also the mother of a two well-fed boys, ages four and six.

In addition to working with families and individuals, she has spoken to hundreds of people in community talks, coached moms through a recurring six-week workshop on nutrition and wellness, and taught cooking classes to adults and preschoolers. She is a member of the National Association of Nutrition Professionals, Weston A. Price Foundation, and Bay Area Family Wellness, a collective of Bay Area health care professionals dedicated to providing families with the tools and services they need to improve all aspects of their health and wellness.