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Olive oil or coconut oil: Which is worthy of kitchen-staple status?

POSTED JUNE 18, 2020, 10:30 AM



[Emily Gelsomin, MLA, RD, LDN](#)

Contributor

Coconut oil has developed a cultlike following in recent years, with proponents touting benefits ranging from body fat reduction to heart disease prevention. Sadly for devotees, the evidence to support these assertions remains rather sparse.

But there is plenty of research to suggest that other plant-based oils have advantages over their animal-derived counterparts, particularly when it comes to heart health. So which is best? While no specific type should be hyped as a panacea, one variety isn't getting the press it deserves: olive oil.

The case for olive oil continues to grow

Olive oil is a staple fat in the [Mediterranean diet](#), and its previously publicized benefits have largely relied on examining its use by European populations. This information is useful, but looking at olive oil within the context of American diets provides us with stronger data to guide dietary choices here at home.

A recent study published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* looked at adults in the United States and found that replacing margarine, butter, or mayonnaise with olive oil was associated with reduced cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk. This is particularly notable because Americans tend to consume less olive oil than our European counterparts. In the US, high consumers averaged a little less than one tablespoon of olive oil a day, whereas daily intake in studies examining Mediterranean populations has been as high as three tablespoons.

After taking demographic and lifestyle factors into consideration, those consuming more than half a tablespoon per day had a reduced risk of developing CVD compared to those using olive oil infrequently (less than once per month). Consuming more olive oil was also associated with a decreased likelihood of dying from CVD. Even slight increases in olive oil consumption, like replacing roughly a teaspoon of margarine or butter each day with a similar amount of olive oil, had advantages.

Olive oil was also correlated with a reduction in inflammatory compounds that may contribute to the progression of CVD. Olives contain plant chemicals called polyphenols that may help reduce inflammation. Using virgin olive oil, which is extracted through mechanical rather than chemical means, is thought to offer higher levels of protective plant compounds than refined olive oils. Extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) is a product of the preferred, mechanical processing.

Though we need more research, these polyphenols may also extend benefits to other areas of the body, like the brain. For instance, along with other healthy diet habits like eating leafy greens, primarily using olive oil when cooking has been associated with combating the decline in brain function that happens as we age.

How does coconut oil compare?

Proponents of coconut oil cite the medium-chain fatty acids it contains as a benefit because of the unique way these fats are digested. It's claimed these fats offer advantages related to weight loss and cholesterol, though these assertions remain controversial. Regardless, lauric acid, the primary fat found in coconut oil, is thought to behave differently from other medium-chain fats, and may not deliver as promised.

In a recently published study in the journal *Circulation*, which compiled data from a variety of trials, coconut oil did not show benefits related to waist circumference or body fat compared to other plant-based fats. Coconut oil, a tropical plant oil, also did not fare as well as nontropical plant oils, like olive oil, with respect to reducing other cardiac risk factors. In fact, coconut oil *increased* low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, the kind associated with an increased risk of heart disease.

Coconut has been an important fat in a variety of traditional diets in Asia, and is touted to impart health benefits within these communities, including fewer cardiac complications and premature deaths. However, these diets often feature minimally processed coconut products, like coconut flesh, which are also higher in nutrients like fiber. Lifestyle habits in these Asian communities also typically include eating more fruits, vegetables, and fish than in many American diets.

That said, extra virgin coconut oil, which can be purchased in the United States, is arguably less processed, and often refined in a manner similar to EVOO. A recent trial published in *BMJ Open* looking at extra virgin coconut oil did not show an increase in LDL cholesterol when compared to EVOO during a four-week period. (Both oils performed better than butter.) Unfortunately, there are not enough human studies involving extra virgin coconut oil to support its use as a primary fat in our diets. Nor do we have information about its long-term effects here in the US.

And the winner is... olive oil

The benefits of using nontropical plant-based oils remain very promising, making olive oil a natural choice in the kitchen. Try oil and vinegar on a fresh summer salad, or in place of mayo in potato or tuna salad. Consider a drizzle of olive oil instead of a pat of butter or margarine when cooking vegetables. And keep coconut fat to occasional use, say, to enhance the flavor of a vegetable curry, or as a substitute for butter in baked desserts.

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Comments:

[POSTED JUNE 25TH, 2020 AT 5:33 AM](#)

Toby Dayrit

This comparison between coconut oil and olive oil is like asking which is better: apples or oranges? Anyone who knows anything about fatty acid profiles will know that coconut oil and olive oil have very different fatty acid profiles. So, this is not a useful comparison: coconut oil and olive oil are both healthy oils, just as apples and oranges are both healthy.

[POSTED JUNE 24TH, 2020 AT 1:36 AM](#)

Nande

Complete double blind test is required with virgin covonut oil vs olive oil done at least a year including the chemical changes at high heat of frying. Memdn

[POSTED JUNE 24TH, 2020 AT 12:01 AM](#)

Cindy

Corn Oil is the best for lowering cholesterol

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 8:45 AM

valia

is olive oil safe when used for frying and cooking?

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 1:04 PM

Neil Hogan

There are a lot of scientific studies out there now that show that not only is EVOO safe for cooking, it also retains much of the polyphenol content. Studies have also found that cooking a basic tomato sauce with EVOO helps the bioavailability of the antioxidants in the tomatoes.

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 8:27 AM

Dr. Sylvain Ndebi

Tropical diet, like the Asian diet mentioned, ALWAYS includes fish and, even more so, vegetables and FRUITS (that appear seasonally, abundantly, and nonstop). The typical North American diet is simply loaded with overtakes/overloads of 'bad' foods (e.g. packaged processed foods, mega-starchy foods like pizza, fried and greasy meats, etc.) and 'regrettable' eating habits (over-snacking, random fast-food meals, artificial sugars, overeating corn syrup, etc.). Seems that switching to anyone of these oils is better overall, and overlooking 'suspicious' ours-theirs terms like Mediterranean vs Tropical would help readers better.

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 7:28 AM

Yasmin

Hi,

I love how you mention "coconut oil has developed a cultlike following during recent years"

which is true,

Makes me smile

Thanks for your informative and knowledgeable News letter,

Keep it up

Thanks

POSTED JUNE 24TH, 2020 AT 7:08 AM

Osman

Interesting info. Thanks for the relevant insights.

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 5:57 AM

padmini chandran

in asia the oil is always heated to saute the vegetables or curry.

it is coconut oil that does not become toxic when heated.

olive oil we can use in salads or when used without heating..

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 5:15 PM

JOE BAARS

I WAS BORN IN 1927 AND SPEND 3 YEARS IN THE JUNGLES OF JAVA /
INDONESIA

COCONUT++ WAS A DAILY ADDITION TO OUR FOOD , I HAVE KEPT THIS
GOING FOR THE REST OF MY HEALTH FULL LIVE , I STILL DRIVE 500
MILES + EVERY WEEK AND FEEL I AM IN MY LATE FIFTYS I WOULD LIKE
TO ADD TO THIS WHEN A KAMPONG [VILLAGE] DOCTOR ADVISED ME
FOR THE REST OF THE BATTALION TO EATH BROWN RICE TO STAY
HEALTY TO AVOID AND HEAL HONGER OEDEEM + + + THIS IS OF
COURSE JUST A FRACTION+ + + OF MY LIFE , IF YOU LIKE TO LIVE A
HEALTHY LIFE ???, LOVE CARE AND NO HATE !!!!!!!

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 5:10 AM

Boon Ywe

I believe macadamia oil is the winner in term of boiling temperature and Omega 3:6 ratio too.

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 2:36 AM

Lanier Dodson

The question is not whether olive or coconut oil is better for you than butter, margerine, etc. My question is whether either is better than no added oil in the diet? That is the way I eat.

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 2:24 AM

Janaki Srinath

maam, whiile olive oil has a near ideal profile of fatty acids required for us, focus should also be on mustard, sesame, soya bean, ground nut oils for their stability to with stand higher temperatures during cooking process.

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 1:47 AM

Jaap Willem

The article mentions olive oil versus coconut oil for digestion but the advocates that got me buying the stuff convinced me with the argument that it deals better with heat so I fry my steak in it.

I think their argument is that olive oile under heat undergoes sometype of malign chemical reaction and the coconut oil does not.

I wonder if there is any truth to this line of thinking.

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 12:02 AM

FPROONEY

There has been some opinion expressed that coconut and medium-chain triglyceride oil may delay the onset and progression of Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, ALS and other conditions.

(The Coconut Oil & Low-Carb Solution by Dr. Mary T. Newport, M.D.)

Do you have any comment? Thank you.

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 10:57 PM

Stephen Boyd

Although I have always had my doubts about coconut oil, I do find it a bit frustrating that after all this time we still don't seem to have big enough, long enough, well-designed studies to guide up. "Four-week study," really?

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 10:41 PM

Mohamad mouazen

In the holy Quran the olive tree was mentioned as blessed tree

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 10:28 PM

Raymond

it would be useful to compare other oils such as Canola .

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 9:17 PM

Joseph Sebastine Poothullil John

Dear Ms. Emily,

Your article is well written and very informative regarding certain aspects of choosing edible oil for use in kitchen.

But I would like to say that the best food for any person is the food available locally and also the food his/her previous generations were consuming. Each one of us are genetically programmed to consume the food our ancestors were using. Therefore, it is inconclusive to say that one food is better than the other without considering the above fact.

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 8:31 PM

Nancy Kelley

What about avocado oil

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 7:37 PM

Marlene Chaplin

Always easy to understand, helpful commentary from this publication.

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 6:53 PM

Virginia Smith

Olive oil has a flavor that I can't tolerate. If I had to substitute butter, canola oil, or coconut oil with olive oil, I would lose weight very quickly because I would eat very little, and I'm already too thin, according to the BMI. And no, I have not said that previously.

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 6:52 PM

Virginia Smith

Olive oil has a flavor that I can't tolerate. If I had to substitute butter, canola oil, or coconut oil with olive oil, I would lose weight very quickly because I would eat very little, and I'm already too thin, according to the BMI.

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 12:04 PM

Sierra

That's okay, Virginia! Nutrition isn't quite as hard and fast as most people think. Finding a healthy way to eat that includes foods you enjoy is better for your mental health, which in turn could actually be better for your physical health.

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 6:17 PM

Michael Carl

According to Dr Dean Ornish (and other plant based diet advocates) olive oil is a no-no for people with known cardiovascular health issues. Can you comment on this ?

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 5:17 PM

Charles

And olive oil makes a great laxative !!

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 5:15 PM

ANNELYN CAMATO

Very interesting. with this information, I was more confirmed of the knowledge that I've known before that olive oil is the best.

I know that olive oil is usually used in salad as a dressing, can we use this in the frying of fish or tofu?

Thank you

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 5:03 PM

Trevor FitzJohn

How does EVOO compare to solvent extracted seed oils such as Canola?

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 4:34 PM

Will

DO an article on cooking with Olive Oil and other oils.

Thanks.

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 4:30 PM

Sarah Stromeyer

Can you please speak to the use of coconut milk (reduced fat) in Asian and Indian cooking? I scrape off most of the fat even from the 'reduced' cans. This works well in recipes. Is this milk healthier than the cooking oil?

Thank you.

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 12:09 PM

Sierra

Definitely- but keep in mind that the portion size of oil vs milk is drastically different which can skew the comparison. Tbl for tbl, though, coconut milk is better for you than coconut oil. I'm not sure how coconut milk compares to something like EVOO, though, and would be interested in what anyone else has to say.

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 3:35 PM

Suzanne Stevens

I agree about the benefits of EVOlive oil, but if you want to fry eggs in it, it doesn't react well to that high of heat!

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 3:09 PM

Janet

If you heat EVOO, are the health benefits the same? Is there such a thing as heating EVOO to too high a temperature?

When EVCO is heated, does it change? For instance we hear about the smoke point being lower for coconut oil. Is that true for EVCO?

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 3:05 PM

Arun s

I have used limited amounts of coconut oil when I cook or even directly mixed in in my diet. Yet I believe that based on yours and other studies that Olive oil is more effective in preventing CVD and other related maladies. There is no denying that coconut oil adds a wonderful flavor to a lot of dishes when it's used in the preparation off various Asian dishes. Some fried foods in coconut oil taste markedly better than otherwise. If you try it on French fries for example the difference is obvious. Now, granted that not everyone is going to agree, esp if they have limited or compromised taste buds/ lack of tolerance etc.

Cheers! 🍷

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 1:41 PM

Chris

Thank you! I have been a little averse to coconut oil since the saturated fat is so high. Nice on the skin though. We do use it in place of shortening in baking.

The newer craze I am finding is actually MCT (Medium-chain triglycerides) oil, which is apparently coconut oil (and/or palm oil) changed somehow at the molecular level. It is all the rage for Keto diet followers, or folks who generally try to keep their carbs at a very low level (like me for the last 25 years). I am skeptical of this oil too, but have not found any reliable sources to help me understand this better. I probably won't buy it, especially since it is so expensive, but I would love to see what actual scientific investigation ends up with.

In the meantime I will stick with my trusty olive oil. Thanks for the validations. I am never quite sure what is good!

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 1:41 PM

REBECCA A. ELLIS

I'm glad EVOO was the winner. I have been using EVOO for the past ten years and never had a problem with my Cholesterol. I started using Organic Coconut Oil, and my LDL Cholesterol number increased significantly, so I stopped using the C Oil. I will never use Coconut Oil again. I get my fats from EVOO, Avocado, and nuts.

Thank You.

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 1:32 PM

Roxanne Gordon

I have started to sauté with coconut oil because olive oil has such a high flash temperature, smoking, browning, it requires added butter. You cannot sauté meats or vegetables with olive oil alone.

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 9:37 AM

PollyD

Saute at a lower temperature and you can use EVOO without problems.

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 1:18 PM

Bea Reynolds

Any studies on comparing olive oil and avocado oil – wonder they they stack up?

POSTED JUNE 24TH, 2020 AT 4:54 AM

L. Dassanayake

Some websites state that although olive oil is the best of oils, it is not a healthy oil. Further it is said that it is not a key ingredient of the meditaranian diet. My question is ,is coconut milk powder healthy?

Doctors say it is better than dairy milk for people who have flem problems ?

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 1:10 PM

Perry Caminis

If a mayonnaise is made from a tsp of mustard, 1 egg yolk, and 1 1/2 cups of EVOO, are the benefits very nearly the same as using EVOO alone?

POSTED JUNE 23RD, 2020 AT 12:11 PM

Sierra

Yes- egg does not have an affect on the nutrition of EVOO and would make up a very small proportion of your recipe.

POSTED JUNE 22ND, 2020 AT 10:05 AM

Ram Athreya

Ms Emily Gelsomin

Before coming to any conclusions about (Virgin) Coconut oil , please read 2 books by Dr Mary Newport , who successfully treated her (late) husband's Alzheimer's disease.

1. The Complete book of Ketones
- 2.The Coconut oil & Low-Carb Solution for Alzheimer's , Parkinson's and other diseases.

POSTED JUNE 19TH, 2020 AT 7:07 PM

Steven G Ruimuku

What about olive oil and avocado oil(CPAO)?

Despite the fact that we can trace olive oils before the birth of Jesus Christ while the entrance of CPAO ia a very recent product in the market ,may be less

than 50 years, I feel the latter is gaining preferences. But why? I don't know.
Can smoking point be the "stand alone" reason behind it?

POSTED JUNE 19TH, 2020 AT 1:31 PM

Karen Schwager

Have there been similar studies done on Avocado oil? If so, would you consider sharing the information and commenting on use of same.

Thank you

Karen

POSTED JUNE 19TH, 2020 AT 10:40 AM

Heracles Brandao

Well, already expected, but what the following researches couldn't hide, was the difficulty in having data for people of same regions when comparing different LDL levels between them.

Also, about the different temperatures each oil becomes saturated after cooking, as well as if the butter not exposed in high temperatures for example, could be as healthy as olive or coconut oils after cooked, when they become saturated.

But that's a beginning, It really looks like people is adhering to a lifestyle change more and more.

POSTED JUNE 18TH, 2020 AT 9:18 PM

Fay fraserfar

Does olive oil help the brain function

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