

**Healthy Bytes Initiative Article**

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**Health Benefits of Coconut**

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The coconut is a fruit, or seed, of the coconut palm found in tropical regions. Although not a true tree, it is often referred to as the “Tree of Life” because it contributes food, drink, fiber, fuel, cosmetics, building materials, musical instruments and more.

The coconut has 3 layers. The outermost layer, exocarp, is green and smooth. The next layer is the husk or mesocarp which surrounds the fibrous inner layer called the endocarp. The coconuts we see in grocery stores have had the exocarp and mesocarp removed, leaving the fibrous endocarp.

There are many types of edible coconut. The immature seed is filled with liquid endosperm or coconut water. As it matures, the water solidifies on the walls, creating the seed. The inner white seed is often referred to as the kernel, flesh or meat. When solid coconut flesh is mixed with water, it creates coconut milk. Coconut oil is made by pressing dried coconut meat, and coconut flour is ground dried coconut meat.

Coconuts are high in fat, with most of that being saturated fat. Unlike animal sources of saturated fat, coconut fat consists of medium-chain triglycerides or MCTs. MCTs are metabolized quickly and are converted into energy rather than being stored on the body. They have been shown to improve gut health and digestion. Coconuts also contain small amounts of healthy unsaturated fats. They are also rich in minerals manganese and copper, vitamin C and B vitamins, and insoluble fiber which prevents constipation and hemorrhoids.

Coconuts provide a combination of food products. Coconut meat is most often found dried in flakes. Choose unsweetened, unsulfured flakes when possible. Flakes can be used in recipes to add chewiness for example in cookies, muffins or candy. Flakes can be stirred into soups or stews, sprinkled onto salads or tossed into smoothies. Coconut milk, most often found in cans, is used to thicken soups or make curry dishes. Seek out brands that are BPA-free since toxic BPAs accumulate in high-fat foods like coconut milk. BPA or Bisphenol-A is used in the production of plastics and is found in the plastic used to line cans. When foods in cans are exposed to high heat associated with sealing the cans, BPAs can leach into foods. BPA can be linked to cancer, heart problems, Alzheimer’s, diabetes and childhood asthma.

Coconut oil can be used to replace margarine, butter or oil in recipes but it does carry the coconut flavor which can compete with or complement other foods. It can also be used as a skin moisturizer or hair treatment. Coconut flour is made by squeezing the liquid from the coconut meat and ground into flour suitable for baking. It is higher in fiber and absorbs liquid during baking which can result in thicker or heavier baked products. It is recommended you replace only to 20% of the flour in a recipe with coconut flour. Coconut sugar is a good alternative sweetener to cane sugar since it contains a small amount of inulin, a soluble fiber known to help regulate blood sugars. It has a color and flavor profile similar to brown sugar and can be used in the same ratio as cane sugar.

Since coconuts are fruits, they are considered a healthy food choice to be used in many different ways. They are high in fat and calories so be careful not to overdo intake.