Ask Dr. Coconut ™

Dr. Bruce Fife a.k.a. "Dr. Coconut" answers two of the most often asked questions about coconut oil.

I hear some people claim that one brand of coconut oil is better than another because it has a higher lauric acid content. Is this true?

Fats and oils are composed of fat molecules known as fatty acids. The character of each fat or oil is determined by the amounts and the types of fatty acids it contains. Coconut oil is composed predominately of medium-chain fatty acids (MCFA). This is what makes coconut oil so different from other fats and what makes it incredibly healthy.

Medium-chain fatty acids (MCFA) provide many health benefits: they are quick and easy to digest, boost energy, balance blood sugar, and protect against cancer, among other things. One of their most remarkable features is their ability to kill disease-causing bacteria, viruses, and fungi. Because of these antimicrobial properties coconut oil is used as a natural antibacterial, anti-viral, and anti-fungal remedy. Since coconut oil is a food, it is harmless to us but is effective in killing many microorganisms that cause illness.

Although many fatty acids possess antimicrobial properties, MCFAs are the most potent. Lauric acid, which is one of the MCFAs, appears to have the greatest antimicrobial effect.

On average, coconut oil consists of about 47 percent lauric acid. Since lauric acid possesses the greatest antimicrobial power, some people have reasoned that the higher the lauric acid content in the oil, the more effective it is. Some coconut oil distributors proudly advertise that their oil contains more lauric acid than others, inferring that their oil must be better. Producers are even attempting to alter coconut oil chemically or genetically to increase the lauric acid content.

People argue that oil containing 48 or 49 percent lauric acid is better than those with only 47 percent. Will one or two percent make a difference? Not hardly. A difference of one or two percent is insignificant and meaningless.

Also, percentages can and do vary even from the same manufacturer. The fatty acid content of the oil will vary depending on the age of the coconuts, variety, seasonal changes, etc. So even if a

batch of coconut oil had a lauric acid content of 49 percent in one test, in another month it may drop to 46 percent. The company may claim 49 percent and have documentation to prove it (on that one batch), but the majority of the oil they sell may contain only 46 percent. So you can't trust what manufacturers claim.

What about oil that contains significantly higher amounts, such as 55 percent or more? Is there an advantage in high lauric acid coconut oil?

Coconut oil is composed of 10 different fatty acids. Most all of them possess antimicrobial properties. Each is unique and affects microorganisms differently. One fatty acid may be very effective in killing certain types of bacteria, while another is more effective in killing viruses or other types of bacteria. Lauric acid has the greatest overall antimicrobial effect, but it is not the best for all types of organisms. Caprylic acid or capric acid, two other MCFAs may be better at killing certain types of organisms. All of the fatty acids work synergistically together for the greatest overall effect. Synergism means that the total effect of all the fatty acids is greater than the sum of the individual effects. Coconut oil contains a variety of fatty acids. This is how nature has designed it.

When you increase the percentage of one fatty acid, such as lauric acid, you must decrease the percentage of another. Which one or ones you do eliminate? Do you take out caprylic or capric acid? Will removing a fatty acid reduce the synergistic effect of the entire oil? Even if you increase the most active fatty acid, taking out or reducing another fatty acid may lower the overall antimicrobial effect of the oil. When you tamper with nature's design, the results aren't always predictable or desirable.

And what about the other health effects of coconut oil, such as digestion, energy production, blood sugar control, and so forth? How will altering the fatty acid content affect these? Lauric acid does not digest as readily as caprylic or capric acids. So increasing the lauric acid content by decreasing these other fatty acids will decrease the benefits the oil has on digestion. Other health benefits may also be negatively affected.

So, I would not pay much attention to marketing ploys about lauric acid content.

Also, a high lauric acid coconut oil can still be of low quality and undesirable. The best criterion for choosing a good quality coconut oil,

regardless of its lauric acid content, is by evaluating its aroma and flavor. If it smells and tastes good, then use it. ■