Ask Dr. Coconut ™

Dr. Bruce Fife a.k.a. "Dr. Coconut" answers your questions about coconut, diet, and nutrition.

Will Eating Coconut Oil Raise My Cholesterol?

This is the most often asked question I receive regarding coconut oil. This is a legitimate concern because we have been conditioned to believe that all saturated fats raise cholesterol. Since coconut oil contains a high amount of saturated fat, it would stand to reason that it, too, would raise cholesterol.

The truth is, eating coconut oil will *improve* your cholesterol values and reduce your risk of heart disease. Many people, however, have expressed concern after having their blood cholesterol checked and finding that their total cholesterol has increased since they began using coconut oil. If coconut oil reduces risk of heart disease, why did their cholesterol levels rise?

I have found that people's response varies when they start using coconut oil. In some people total cholesterol decreases, while in others it increases. But in either case, their HDL (good) cholesterol always increases. The rise in total cholesterol that some people experience is due mostly to an increase in good cholesterol. Their cholesterol ratio (total cholesterol/HDL cholesterol) improves, thus *reducing* their risk of heart disease.

It is an established fact that the cholesterol ratio is a far more accurate indicator of heart disease risk than total cholesterol. Total cholesterol, in fact, is misleading and is a poor risk indicator because it lumps together both LDL (bad) cholesterol and HDL (good) cholesterol. Total cholesterol gives you no indication of how much is good and how much is bad. You can have high total cholesterol, but if a large percentage of it is made up of HDL, then your risk is low.

The lower the cholesterol ratio the better. A cholesterol ratio of 5.0 mg/dl is considered average risk. Above this value is high risk and below is less than average risk. A ratio of 3.2 mg/dl or less is considered optimal or the lowest risk.

If you have a total cholesterol value of 240 mg/dl, this would be considered high. You would be told that you are at high risk for heart disease. Your doctor would tell you to reduce your saturated fat intake and have you take cholesterol-lowering drugs. However, if your HDL value was 75 mg/dl, your cholesterol ratio would be 3.2 mg/dl. This value is in the optimal range and you would have the lowest risk. Since the cholesterol ratio is a far more accurate indicator of heart disease risk, even though your total cholesterol may be high, your actual risk is very low.

Just the opposite can also happen. If a person has a total cholesterol reading of 178 mg/dl, that would be considered ideal and believed to indicate low risk. If, however, his HDL was only 35 mg/dl, his cholesterol ratio would be 5.1 mg/dl, which is in the *high risk* category! This explains why so many people who die of heart disease have normal or below normal total cholesterol levels and why many people with high total cholesterol levels, live long lives without experiencing heart problems.

When people ask me about their cholesterol values, I tell them to ignore total cholesterol and look at their cholesterol ratio. In every case, the cholesterol ratio improves when they start using coconut oil and their risk of heart disease drops.

Here is an actual case. A woman had a family history of high cholesterol. Family members had total cholesterol readings in excess of 400 mg/dl. After adding coconut oil into her diet, her total cholesterol rose from 336 to 376 mg/dl. Ordinarily this is considered very high. However, her HDL (good) cholesterol nearly doubled from 65 to 120 mg/dl. Her cholesterol ratio dropped from a high risk value of 5.2 mg/dl to a low risk value of 3.1 mg/dl, which is in the optimal range. Although she had a very high total cholesterol reading, her true risk was very low. Her blood pressure was optimal at 110/60.

Studies have consistently shown that coconut oil increases HDL and improves the cholesterol ratio. While coconut oil does not reduce *total*cholesterol as effectively as polyunsaturated oils do, it has a greater effect on HDL. When HDL and cholesterol ratio values are evaluated, coconut oil reduces risk of heart disease

more than soybean, canola, safflower, or any other vegetable oil typically recommended as "heart healthy." Interestingly, most vegetable oils increase the cholesterol ratio, thus *increasing* the risk of heart disease. Coconut oil is definitely the best oil you can use to protect yourself from heart disease.■