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“Our mission is educating women to be aware of breast health behaviors that reduce risk and lead to the early detection of breast cancer”

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World's Healthiest Oils: Olive, Coconut, or Other?

Introduction:

Let me start by admitting I believe **extra virgin olive oil** is the best oil when it comes to health and taste. The benefits of olive oil have been documented in multiple studies over the past decades. However, the most convincing evidence of the benefits of olive oil comes from the recently published book "**The Blue Zones Solutions**"*. This book examines five populations in the world that live the longest. It also looks at populations with the highest percentage of individuals who live to age one hundred while maintaining a vigorous lifestyle.

One of the 5 blue zones is Ikaria Greece where the population consumed a "Mediterranean" style diet. A large percentage of calories in this diet come from olive oil. Individuals who consumed more than 4 tablespoons of olive oil daily experienced a 50% mortality reduction.

Admittedly, just adding 4 tablespoons of olive oil a day to your diet is no guarantee you will experience similar health benefits. The Blue Zone study indicated many lifestyle factors are associated with longevity. However, I am convinced that a Mediterranean diet with a high intake of olive oil has the potential to reduce heart disease and dementia and to increase longevity.

Reservations about olive oil:

A recent event caused me to curb my enthusiasm for olive oil. I was sautéing mushrooms, when I was distracted by a phone call. A couple of minutes later I returned to the mushrooms only to see plumes of dark smoke emanating from the frying pan. I immediately turned off the heat, but noted a persistent foul smell. The mushrooms had an unsavory flavor.

A Google search provided a quick explanation. Extra-virgin olive oil has a low **smoke point**, which is defined as the temperature at which oils produce a continuous bluish smoke. The smoke contains **trans fats** and other toxic chemicals that predispose to heart disease and cancer. This experience prompted me to do an extensive review to identify the "**world's best cooking oil**".

As it turned out, the review proved to be more challenging than expected. There were so many conflicting opinions that I had to rely on my best judgment to form my conclusions. To me, the final choice was simple: The best oil for cooking (frying, sautéing or baking) is **cold pressed, virgin, coconut oil**. The following provides a brief review as to how I came to that conclusion.

Historical Review:

Over a century ago, our ancestors relied on lard (example: pig fat) and butter for cooking. In an attempt to come up with a lower priced cooking oil a new product was introduced in the early 1900's called **Crisco**. It was derived from cottonseeds, which were plentiful and inexpensive. The seeds were processed at high temperatures and chemicals were used to create the final product. It was a huge economic success.

By the 1950's, rates of heart attacks and strokes in the USA reached epidemic proportions. Researchers identified trans fats that were found in high levels in Crisco as a major contributor to the rising rate of heart disease.

Manufacturers were quick to respond:

Manufacturers noted that Crisco was not just high in trans fats, but it was also high in **saturated fats**. This led them to create a new source of oils. A process was developed to extract **unsaturated fat from plant sources**. The new products had a short shelf life and soon became rancid. They also had a low smoke point. These problems were solved through a process called **partial hydrogenation**, in which hydrogen is bubbled through the oils at high temperatures. These new oils proved to be an economic windfall.

Despite the introduction of the partially hydrogenated plant based oils, rates of heart disease, stroke and dementia continued to rise. Analysis of the plant oils indicated that they still contained high level of trans fats and chemicals.

In response to these health concerns, attempts were made to modify cooking oils by processing them at lower temperatures and reducing exposure to toxic chemicals. An example of this trend is **Canola oil**. It is derived from a genetically modified rapeseed, which is an inexpensive seed that was initially developed to feed cattle. Canola oil is now available that is "expeller pressed" which means lower temperatures are used to squeeze the oil from the seed. This process is more expensive because the pressing is not as efficient as chemical in extracting oil from the rapeseed.

One of the major selling points for Canola oil is that it contains the highest level of mono-unsaturated fats of any oil on the market. **Mono-unsaturated fat** is a "**good fat**" that protects against heart disease. Canola oil has been labeled by some experts as the world's healthiest oil, but I remain skeptical.

The case for olive and coconut oil:

Both olive and coconut oils have been used for centuries. Populations who consume these oils have low levels of heart disease and dementia. Both oils are “**cold pressed**” which means they are processed at even lower temperatures than with expeller pressing.

Olive oil has almost as high a percentage of mono-unsaturated fat as does Canola Oil. However, Canola, like all plant-based oils is high in **Omega-6 oils**. Many scientists today believe the main culprit behind the high incidences of chronic illness such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, arthritis, obesity and cancer is the standard American diet is that it contains an excess of omega-6 oils and a relative deficiency in omega 3 oils. Plant based oils and junk foods are the two major sources in the average American diet.

Coconut oil: A Saturated Fat

How could I possibly recommend **coconut oil** as a healthy choice when composed of **saturated fats**? This fascinating question is one that will be reviewed in more detail in next month’s article. The quick answer is that coconut is composed of **medium chained triglycerides**. These fats are quickly absorbed in the intestine and readily converted to ketones by the liver. They serve as an energy source for both muscle and the **brain**. They are rapidly metabolized and do not stimulate the production of insulin. In contrast, **long chained triglycerides**, which are primarily derived from animal and dairy sources, are slowly absorbed and for the most part transferred to fat stores.

Cold pressed virgin coconut oil has a high smoke point and a wonderful taste. It is my cooking oil of choice. I am convinced that it has the potential to facilitate weight loss, and to reduce the risks of developing heart disease, Diabetes II and **dementia**. Next month’s issue of Ask the Doctor will explain the health benefits of coconut oil in more detail.

Caveat:

If you have heart disease or other medical conditions that require a special diet, I suggest you review my recommendation with your physician. Also, some people experience intestinal distress (nausea, and or bloating) when adding coconut oil to their diet. These symptoms can usually be eliminated by slowly introducing coconut oil into your diet.

Reference:

* The Blue Zones Solution: by Dan Buettner: (published by National Geographic) 2015.

