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A MONTHLY GUIDE TO NATURAL DOG CARE & TRAINING

Crazy About Coconut Oil

October 2005

“Virgin” or unrefined, this healthy oil has multiple benefits for your dog.



By CJ Puotinen

What's the hottest new health food for pets and people? If you're like most Americans, it's something you've been avoiding for years – either that or you think it's a sun tan lotion, not a food. That's right, we're talking about coconut oil.

[IMGCAP(1)]An important ingredient in America's processed foods for most of the 20th century, coconut oil is one of the world's few saturated-fat vegetable oils. That designation gave it a terrible reputation, and by the 1980s and '90s, it all but disappeared from our food supply. Then the vegetable oils that replaced it caused more harm than coconut oil ever did, and now coconut oil is making a comeback.

There are dozens of products on the market, but look for unrefined oil at your health food store. We like to see oils packaged in glass jars (rather than plastic containers). The really good stuff is expensive, but its benefits are worth the money.

For thousands of years, coconuts have been a staple of tropical cuisines, and those who followed a traditional coconut-based diet, such as Pacific Islanders, had none of the heart disease, cancer, diabetes, or other illnesses that

plague modern America.

According to its advocates, when taken internally, coconut oil:

- Reduces the risk of cancer and other degenerative conditions
- Improves cholesterol levels and helps fight heart disease
- Improves digestion and nutrient absorption
- Heals digestive disorders like Crohn's disease, irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers, and colitis
- Contains powerful antibacterial, antiviral, and antifungal agents that prevent infection and disease
- Relieves arthritis
- Prevents and treats yeast and fungal infections, including thrush and candidiasis
- Prevents and treats viral infections, including herpes, measles, and the flu
- Helps balance the body's metabolism and hormones
- Promotes normal thyroid function

- Helps prevent or control diabetes
- Rejuvenates the skin and protects against skin cancer, age spots, acne, and other blemishes
- Helps prevent osteoporosis
- Reduces allergic reactions
- Supplies fewer calories than other fats.

Applied topically, its boosters say that coconut oil also does the following:

- Disinfects cuts
- Promotes wound healing
- Improves skin health and hair condition
- Deodorizes whatever it touches (some people brush their teeth with it or use it as an underarm deodorant)
- Clears up warts, moles, psoriasis, eczema, dandruff, precancerous lesions, athlete's foot, jock itch, diaper rash, ringworm, vaginal yeast infections, and toenail fungus.

All of this is excellent news for people and their dogs, for most of coconut oil's human benefits are shared by canines. And dogs love the taste, which makes feeding coconut oil and other coconut products easy and pleasant.

Get the right type

Coconut oil is produced in Thailand, Fiji, the Philippines, Brazil, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Hawaii, Mexico, the Solomon Islands, Belize, Samoa, and other countries around the world. Most health food stores carry at least one or two brands, and many retailers sell coconut oil online or by mail.

There are two main types of coconut oil.

Refined coconut oil (often labeled RBD for Refined, Bleached, and Deodorized) is made from copra, or dried coconut meat, then treated to remove impurities. Most RBD coconut oil is inexpensive, bland, and odorless. It doesn't contain all of the nutrients found in unrefined coconut oil, its fragrance and flavor are different, and in most cases the coconuts used to produce it are of low quality and chemicals like chlorine and hexane are used in the refining process. Some brands of refined coconut oil are labeled for use as a skin and hair care product.

Unrefined or "virgin" coconut oil, which is made from fresh coconuts, has culinary and health experts excited. Pressed by hand using traditional methods or manufactured in state-of-the-art factories, virgin coconut oil retains most of the nutrients found in fresh coconut.

In traditional methods, coconut meat is heated or baked until dry and then pressed, or fresh coconut milk is pressed from the meat and then heated to remove its water content, or freshly pressed coconut milk is allowed to ferment for 24 to 36 hours, during which the oil separates from the water. In modern factories, expeller-pressed coconut milk is centrifuged and vacuum-evaporated to remove water. Other methods of removing water from coconut oil include refrigeration and the use of enzymes.

The result of these traditional and modern manufacturing methods is an assortment of coconut oils in a range of flavors, prices, and quality.

Refined coconut oil can cost as little as \$3 for a 16-ounce (one-pint) jar, while the same amount of virgin organic coconut oil can cost \$18 or more. Several brands are available in larger sizes, including gallon tubs, which lowers their per-ounce cost considerably. Assuming the oil is correctly labeled and properly prepared, virgin organic coconut oil in glass rather than plastic is the favorite of most experts.

Depending on temperature, coconut oil will be solid or liquid. Below 75o Fahrenheit, coconut oil is solid and white, like lard or vegetable shortening, and it is sometimes called coconut butter. At 76o F and above, coconut oil is a

transparent liquid.

Good-quality oil is colorless when liquid and pure white when solid, never yellow or pink, and it should not contain any residue or have an “off” or rancid odor. “Many people complain that coconut oil makes their throat feel scratchy or causes a burning sensation,” says Bruce Fife, ND, who has written several books about coconut oil. “The catch in the throat is a sign of poor quality. Some of these oils have a roasted or smoky flavor and aroma, which is another indication of poor quality, as it comes from smoke that contaminates the oil during heat processing.”

The only exceptions to the 76-degree rule are hydrogenated and fractionated coconut oils.

Hydrogenated coconut oil, which is solid at room temperature and melts at 92o F, is sold as a soap ingredient and as a food – but because it contains harmful trans-fats, we don’t recommend it for you or your dog. A 1954 study in which hydrogenated coconut oil raised the cholesterol of laboratory rabbits set the stage for coconut oil’s removal from America’s food supply. All research suggesting that coconut oil is harmful to health was conducted using hydrogenated oil, while studies conducted with nonhydrogenated coconut oil show that coconut oil protects the heart and improves overall health (see “Resources and Recommended Reading” sidebar).

Fractionated coconut oil, also known as caprylic/capric triglyceride, is a popular massage oil and aromatherapy ingredient because it remains liquid at temperatures far below 75o F. To make it, coconut oil is heated and the top liquid fraction removed, purifying the oil by removing molds, fungus spores, and pesticide residues. Fractionated coconut oil is sold as a cosmetic ingredient.

Medium-chain fatty acids

Most of coconut oil’s health benefits come from medium-chain fatty acids (MCFAs), also known as medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs). According to former University of Maryland biochemist and dietary fats researcher Mary Enig, PhD, “The lauric acid in coconut oil is used by the body to make the same disease-fighting fatty acid derivative monolaurin that babies make from the lauric acid they get from their mothers’ milk. The monoglyceride monolaurin is the substance that keeps infants from getting viral, bacterial, or protozoal infections.”

Coconut oil’s capric and caprylic acid have similar properties and are best known for their antifungal effects. Like lauric acid, capric acid helps balance insulin levels.

In addition to protecting the body against infection, medium-chain fatty acids are efficiently metabolized to provide an immediate source of fuel and energy, enhancing athletic performance and aiding weight loss. In fact, several coconut diet books are now in print.

“The energy boost you get from coconut oil is not like the kick you get from caffeine,” says Dr. Fife. “It gently elevates the metabolism, provides a higher level of energy and vitality, protects you from illness, and speeds healing. In dogs, the medium-chain fatty acids in coconut oil balance the thyroid, helping overweight dogs lose weight and helping sedentary dogs feel energetic. As a bonus, coconut oil improves any dog’s skin and coat, improves digestion, and reduces allergic reactions.”

During the last few decades, extensive research on medium-chain fatty acids has documented their health benefits, and many supplements and health foods contain MCFAs or MCTs. You’ll find them listed that way on their labels – but their source, which isn’t listed, is always coconut oil. “We’ve become so phobic about coconut oil,” says Dr. Fife, “that manufacturers who appreciate its benefits have been smuggling it into all kinds of products. Start reading labels and you’ll be surprised at all the MCFAs and MCTs. Those abbreviations always mean coconut oil.”

[IMGCAP(2)]Dosing dogs

No one has tested coconut oil’s effect on dogs in clinical trials, but the anecdotal evidence is impressive. Reports published on Internet forums describe how overweight dogs become lean and energetic soon after they begin eating coconut oil, or their shabby-looking coats become sleek and glossy, and dogs with arthritis or ligament problems grow stronger and more lively. Even some serious diseases have responded. In one case, a Doberman Pinscher with severe Wobblers made a dramatic recovery in less than a week while taking coconut oil.

Other reports involve itchy skin, cuts, wounds, and ear problems. Dogs with flea allergies, contact dermatitis, or other allergic reactions typically stop scratching soon after coconut oil is added to their food, and dogs treated topically for bites, stings, ear

mites, ear infections, cuts, or wounds recover quickly. One dog was stung by a bee, causing her mouth to swell. An hour after her owner applied coconut oil to the sting and gave her a tablespoon to swallow, the swelling disappeared and the dog was herself again.

Smell you later!

The most enthusiastic reports describe coconut oil's deodorizing effects.

Bob Ansley in Shallotte, North Carolina, started feeding his "incredibly smelly" black Lab, Smokey Joe, the coconut oil he drains from his wok after frying eggs, sausages, and other foods.

"Joe's coat shined up," says Ansley, "but the real surprise was that he stopped stinking. He has always smelled really bad, and bathing was a waste of time. For years when I petted him, I had to hold my hands away from my clothes and go wash my hands soon and thoroughly. My wife and kids wouldn't touch him. Now I can pet him and rub him like he craves without having to run and wash up. The stench is gone and we didn't even change his bedding. I'm pretty amazed. The cure was cheap, too!"



One good candidate for supplementation is the thick-coated dog who is often greasy or smelly. Many of these "stinkers" have freshened up when receiving a little coconut oil daily. Just start out with a low dosage (perhaps just a dab) and increase slowly.

In the months since he started giving Smokey Joe his leftover coconut oil, Ansley has often skipped a few days. As soon as he does, the odor comes back – and as soon as he resumes feeding coconut oil, the odor disappears.

Pam Gillmore of Austin, Texas, is a raw foods chef who teaches healthful food preparation. "I don't have a dog of my own because I travel so much," Gillmore says, "but all my friends have dogs. I sell a high-quality organic raw virgin coconut oil from Mexico that has produced super results in people, and they're always asking me how to help their dogs, cats, or other animals. Coconut oil has done wonders with all of them, especially dogs."

Gillmore also reports that dogs who receive coconut oil stop itching and scratching and their skin clears up. "Their coats really shine after they have been on it for a while. Skin tags and moles disappear after a month or two. Their digestion improves. And they don't have a doggie odor – the coconut oil even takes away bad breath."

Gillmore suggests that the best way to give coconut oil is in small doses throughout the day, "a spoonful here or there depending on the dog's weight." She also says that she has not yet met a dog who does not like the oil – "They usually lap it right up," she says. "Some folks fry eggs in it and make a little extra for their dogs, or they put some in leftover oatmeal or add it to the dog's dinner, but many give it straight off the spoon."

Gillmore concludes, "I can't say enough about how coconut oil helps animals. During the last eight years, I've seen over a hundred dogs improve in all kinds of ways because of coconut oil. I've even had people give it to their pet snakes and birds!"

Oil tell you a story

Bruce Fife has collected coconut oil stories for years, and one of his favorites, mentioned in his new book, *Coconut Cures*, is from a man whose dog developed a lump next to her eye.

"The veterinarian said it looked like a tumor," the owner reported, "and he recommended immediate surgery. I figured that if coconut oil is good for humans, it should be good for animals as well, so I began applying it to the lump on my dog's forehead. As time passed, the lump grew smaller and smaller and eventually disappeared. It never returned. We avoided the surgery.

"Some time later my other dog developed sores just above his upper lip. The vet gave him an antibiotic, but it didn't seem to do any good. After a week I stopped the medication and began applying coconut oil to the sores. They got worse for a few days and then began to heal. He recovered without a problem."

How to administer

For convenient application, store coconut oil in both a glass eyedropper bottle and a small jar. During cold weather, these containers are easy to warm in hot water so that the oil quickly melts.

Use the eyedropper to apply coconut oil to ears, cuts, wounds, mouth sores, and other targeted areas, including your

dog's toothbrush.

Use the small jar to apply coconut oil to larger areas, such as cracked paw pads. Coconut oil is not fast-drying, so use a towel or tissue to remove excess oil as needed. The main challenge with coconut oil's topical application is that dogs love the taste and immediately lick it off. To give coconut oil a chance to disinfect wounds and speed healing, cover the wound with a towel for a few minutes, or distract the dog long enough for at least some of the oil to be absorbed.

Coconut oil is also an excellent massage oil and carrier oil for use with medicinal herbs and aromatherapy. Any of the essential oils mentioned in "Essential Information" (January 2005) can be diluted in coconut oil for safe, effective canine application, and coconut oil is a perfect base for the herbal salves and oils described in "Savvy Salves" (August 2005).

In addition to lubricating the skin and joints, coconut oil acts as a natural preservative, is exceptionally stable, has a long shelf life, does not require refrigeration, and is such a powerful disinfectant that it reduces the need for germ-killing essential oils in aromatherapy blends designed to fight infection.

Important to start sloooooow

Solid or liquid coconut oil can be added to food at any meal or given between meals. The optimum dose for dogs is about 1 teaspoon per 10 pounds of body weight daily, or 1 tablespoon per 30 pounds. These are general guidelines, as some dogs need less and others more.

But don't start with these amounts. Instead, introduce coconut oil a little at a time in divided doses. Because coconut oil kills harmful bacteria, viruses, parasites, yeasts, and fungi, the burden of removing dead organisms can trigger symptoms of detoxification. Headaches, fatigue, diarrhea, and flu-like symptoms are common in humans who consume too much too fast, and similar symptoms can occur in dogs.

Even in healthy dogs, large amounts of coconut oil can cause diarrhea or greasy stools while the body adjusts. Start with small amounts, such as ¼ teaspoon per day for small dogs or puppies and 1 teaspoon for large dogs. Gradually increase the amount every few days. If your dog seems tired or uncomfortable or has diarrhea, reduce the amount temporarily.

Coconut oil isn't the only coconut product that's good for dogs. Fresh or dried coconut is an excellent source of dietary fiber, and dogs enjoy and benefit from the same coconut flakes, coconut flour, coconut cream, coconut milk, shredded coconut, and coconut spreads used by their human companions. Just be sure the products are unsweetened and free from chemical preservatives.

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-Freelance writer and book author CJ Puotinen, her husband, black Labrador retriever, and red tabby cat have all sampled and enjoyed more than 20 brands of coconut oil from around the world.

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