Can Coconut Oil Help Alzheimer’s Patients?

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Coconut Oil and Alzheimer's

Many of us are affected by Alzheimer’s and dementia — whether it is you, your significant other, a friend or a loved one. Unfortunately, at this time, there is no cure. But what if there was a cure and it was something as simple as an ingredient that we could purchase in the baking section of our grocery store? A simple ingredient called coconut oil.

You might not think there is a connection between these two seemingly disconnected topics, but more and more research is showing how coconut oil may be one factor in combatting Alzheimer’s disease, protecting your brain’s health and warding off dementia.

Why Might Coconut Oil Be Beneficial for Alzheimer’s Patients?

Coconut oil has been quite the buzzword over the past several years. It has been touted as a health food and as a cure-all to everything from acne, dry skin, diaper rash and now to Alzheimer’s.

Coconut oil, as we all have been hearing, is a good fat; it contains medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs), which our bodies can use as an alternate energy source by converting them into ketones. Our body’s first source of energy is glucose, and when we run low on glucose, we will break down fat and ketones are the byproduct — the alternate energy source.

According to Cognitive Vitality, a program of Alzheimer’s Drug Discovery Foundation, with Alzheimer's "the ability of the brain to use glucose is impaired. Ketones are an alternative energy source for the brain and might be able to compensate for this impairment."

The Research

Currently, there have been several small trials testing the theory that the MCTs found in coconut oil are beneficial for Alzheimer’s:

- One trial performed on elderly individuals with age-related cognitive decline reported no benefit with the use of an MCT supplement.
- Another trial performed on patients with diabetes showed that MCT supplements preserved cognitive functioning related to hypoglycemia, which can cause a decrease in brain cells, especially if it occurs repeatedly.
- For patients who were carriers of the APOE4 genotype (a genotype that causes atherosclerosis, which in turn increases the risk for certain conditions such as heart attacks, strokes and brain conditions related to cognitive impairment), MCTs were not effective. For patients who were not carriers of this genotype, MCT supplements improved mild cognitive decline.
- There is currently a major trial being performed in the U.S. This study seeks to find whether coconut oil is

safe to use in the Alzheimer’s population and whether it is effective in improving memory and cognition.

As with any health food supplement, it is important to break down the science and ensure that there is adequate research to back up any claims. When it comes to coconut oil, the results look promising.

Coconut Oil’s MCTs and Alzheimer’s Disease Risks

Most of the fats that you would typically find in our diet are made up of something called long-chain fatty acids.

However, coconut oil is unique in the fact that it contains lots of medium-chain fatty acids. Also known as MCTs, these fats are metabolized by your liver and turned into a source of energy known as ketones.

This is where things get interesting. A key side feature of Alzheimer's disease is the brain's reduced ability to metabolize glucose. In other words, your brain gets starved of energy.

However, scientists note that raising your levels of ketones have been linked to improved efficiency in the brain's ability to get energy, as your brain can directly use these ketones.

Another study surrounded men and women with Alzheimer's disease or mild cognitive impairment. The participants were given either MCTs or a placebo. The researchers found that those who were given MCTs had increased memory improvements. This type of research led Emilie Reas, a postdoctoral fellow at UC San Diego who studies brain changes with aging and disease, to conclude that ketones (such as those from coconut oil) may be a "miracle treatment."

Applying Coconut Oil to Your Diet

Utilizing coconut oil as a treatment for Alzheimer’s came about after seeing success with the ketogenic diet. The ketogenic diet was initially used to treat epilepsy in children and has expanded to other neurologic conditions.

According to the Alzheimer’s Society, "In this diet, carbohydrates are strictly limited and replaced by high-fat intakes, forcing the body to use fat as a primary energy source (a similar idea lies behind the Atkins diet.) Coconut oil is used to allow a slightly higher level of carbohydrate intake, making the very strict diet slightly easier to follow, but still preventing the body using sugar from carbohydrates as the main energy source. This works only because the body is forced to metabolize fats. The ketogenic diet must be incredibly strict because the body will always preferentially use glucose for metabolism."

The Charlie Foundation has a wealth of information regarding the ketogenic diet as a means of treating neurologic conditions. Although they share information freely, they also recommend being supervised by a physician, so please speak with your physician regarding beginning a ketogenic diet. It would also be helpful to make an appointment with a registered dietitian (RD) who has ample knowledge in this specific diet.

Cooking With Coconut Oil

Swap out your traditional vegetable oil for coconut oil. Unlike many oils, coconut oil does well as a higher heat without oxidizing, which means you can cook your foods without worrying about raising your cancer risks.

Use Coconut Oil as a Spread

Instead of butter, try dabbing a bit of coconut oil on your morning toast. It adds a tropical flavor that goes well with most whole-grain products.

Add It to Smoothies

A spoon or two of coconut oil adds flavor, plus brain-boosting MCTs.

Use It Instead of Milk or Creamer

Instead of adding dairy to your coffee, which could impact your brain health negatively, try coconut oil. The coconut oil adds natural sweetness and creaminess to your coffee.

Use It to Replace Oil in Baked Goods

From cookies to breads, swap in coconut oil in place of regular oil. You'll hardly notice the difference, and you will get a big dose of brain-boosting MCTs.

The Bottom Line

Until clinical research backs up the claims that coconut oil can cure, or at least improve, Alzheimer's, many experts believe that utilizing coconut oil in the diet is a low-risk treatment.

Although there may be some contraindications, there are few, and it can be added to most people's diets. Speak with your physician before adding coconut oil to your diet.