

SOME MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FOODS

James H. Carraway, M.D.
Eastern Virginia Medical School

There are a lot of misconceptions about basic food items, preparation of food, nutrient value, and alterations in foods which have been processed. Because some of these misconceptions are far different from what we hear as truth, it is worthwhile to explore some of these. This might prompt you to look at a particular food item which you consume on a routine basis and do a search on the internet to find out everything you can about it. Some of the items which bear discussions are coconut and coconut oil, carrots and vitamin A, and vitamin C. Additionally, it is also wise to look at one of the most omnipresent foods in the world.

In regards to the tropical oils such as coconut oil, palm kernel oil, etc., they have been pretty much categorized as unhealthy saturated fats. Much of this has been promoted by the food oil industry, which makes all the cooking and salad oils as well as margarine that we have been eating for a hundred years since the food oil industry began. The whole food oil industry was begun because most oils used for cooking, for baking, and for margarine would become rancid in a short time and could not be shipped or stored without refrigeration. By partially hydrogenating oils, they become resistant to oxidation and can then be stored at room temperature for long periods of time without refrigeration. These oils then become partially hydrogenated or trans-fats and are not healthy for the body, and have probably accounted for much of the high incidence of heart disease and cancer that has been seen in our population over the last 100 years.

It is probably no surprise that in the Polynesian countries as well as in South America, the diets of some people can include about 50-60% of their daily calories from coconut meat and coconut oil. Coconut oil is made up of medium chain fatty acids, of which is lauric acid. This fatty acid is transformed in the body to an antiviral and antibacterial substance. Therefore, if you eat a moderate amount of coconut and if you use small amounts of coconut milk in preparation of your food or even on your cereal, it will be a healthy pathway and not one which you have to worry about. In fact, you need about 30% of your total daily calories as fat, and about one-third of these should be saturated fat from meats, chicken, nuts, or coconut oil. It may be noted here that if you cook your own popcorn at home, a mixture of coconut oil and butter gives the best tasting popcorn of all. One local theatre, the Naro, serves popcorn cooked in coconut oil. Therefore, the myth that coconut oil is bad for you is false; and if you obtain more information on the web and look at some of the statistics, you will be convinced that it is a good food item to consume.

Another food misconception has to do with carrots, vitamin A (carotene), and night blindness. In fact, vitamin A deficiency does cause night blindness, which is a diminished ability to see at night in the presence of otherwise healthy eyes. However, carrots are not the best food to prevent or treat this. In the retina, there are cones which

are responsible for “sharper” vision and rods which are responsible for night vision. In order to nurture the rods to treat or prevent night blindness, maintaining adequate levels of vitamin A is a good thing to do. However, apricots and dark green vegetables including spinach and blueberries furnish better amounts of vitamin A than carrots.

In the days of long sea voyages when refrigeration of food was not available, scurvy was a common disease which killed many sailors after they had been out to sea for 4-6 weeks or more. Scurvy was caused by a deficiency of vitamin C and cured by treatment with foods which had vitamin C in them. At first, the disease manifests with ulcerated areas on the skin and finally bleeding and organ failure, and then death follows.

We think of vitamin C being cured with lime juice, and we all know the story of the British sailors who were called “lymies” because they used limes to prevent scurvy. Actually, when Captain Cook sailed around the world under the British flag, the anti-scorbutic which he carried was sauerkraut or fermented cabbage along with a concentrated fruit drink called “Rob.” Later, Lt. James Lind, a medical doctor in the Royal Navy, used potatoes first and lime and lemon juice later. In 1754 he wrote a treatise on the use of citrus fruits and vegetables to prevent or cure scurvy. Even after these facts were established clearly, it took another 40 years for the British Admiralty to accept the changes in the diet because they felt that the Royal Navy seamen already had the “best diet” of any navy in the world. This cost the lives of many men over those 40 years. What is fact is that lemons have more vitamin C than limes. This was the citrus fruit most used and is one of the best sources of vitamin C for you.

Another misconception is that wheat is really healthy for you. Actually, wheat, barley, and rye include as part of their proteins a component called gluten. This is a complex protein which actually closely resembles some of the body proteins, and it can even cause autoimmune diseases in humans. Although we think of wheat as life-giving, there are better choices of food we can make if we wish to prevent irritable bowel syndrome, arthritis, fibromyalgia, or some of the vascular diseases. About 40% of the US population is negatively affected by the gluten protein, and these people are more susceptible to the diseases noted.

Gluten causes decreased lactose production and decreased sucrose production, both of which are helpful in digesting milk and sugar. It also interferes with the immune response and increases the adrenal load so that adrenal insufficiency can actually result from this. Oats, rice, corn, buckwheat, and soy flour do not contain gluten. Because we think of wheat as good, it is included in many of the types of foods that we eat including bread, bagels, pasta, noodles, cookies, cakes, snack foods, and many other things. Actually you would be better off not eating any wheat and concentrating on other grains for carbohydrates. If you’re going to eat rice, it should be brown rice and not polished rice, as it has had all of its nutrients taken out.

So you see, there is a lot that we either don’t know about certain foods even when we’ve been told that they are “good for us.” They may not be healthy in the long run, and so you have to think about better alternatives to them to maintain your best health. Keep

reading, keep asking Google the questions about the nutrient value and negative aspects of food, and you will be able to continually improve your food choices.