

Where does coconut fit into the Australian Dietary Guidelines?

Coconut continues to be a popular topic of conversation and ingredient to use in 2019. It can be hard to separate fact from fiction when it comes to the health claims around coconut products and here at NAQ we often get questions around using coconut products in child care menus.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend to limit our intake of foods high in saturated fats. Saturated fats are a type of fat that can increase risk of heart disease. Saturated fat is mostly found in animal products, however it is also present in palm oil, coconut oil, milk and cream. Coconut oil is over 90% saturated fat, while coconut milk and cream contain up to 20% saturated fat. It is recommended in the dietary guidelines to replace high fat foods that contain mostly saturated fat with polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats such as oils, spreads, nut butters/pastes and avocado.

Coconut milk and cream are often used in curries, soups, coconut rice, in baking and as a substitute for milk or milk products. When you compare the nutrient profile of cow's milk with coconut milk, it is evident that nutritionally, coconut milk cannot be used as a substitute for cow's milk. Cow's milk is lower in saturated fat content, higher in protein, an excellent source of calcium and other essential vitamins and minerals.



The table below shows a nutrient comparison between cow's milk, coconut milk and coconut cream.

Per 100mL	Cow's milk Regular fat	Coconut milk – tinned	Coconut milk – carton Calcium fortified & unsweetened	Coconut cream – tinned
Energy	290kj	630kj	100kj	930kj
Protein	3.5g	1.4g	0.2g	1.6g
Carbohydrate	6.1g	1.7g	0.8g	1.4g
Fat	3.5g	15.7g	2.2g	23.7g
- Saturated fat	2.3g	12.7g	2.1g	19.2g
Calcium	120mg	3mg	120mg	2mg

Coconut does have a delicious flavour and small amounts of coconut products can be included as part of a healthy diet. However, when it is already a challenge to meet 50% of food group requirements in a child care menu, adding in coconut products reduces opportunities to include more nutritious foods in the menu. In our Food Foundations menu assessments, coconut oil, coconut milk and coconut cream are classified as discretionary foods and we recommend child care menus to offer no more than 1 serve of discretionary foods per day.

Here are some tips for using coconut products:

- Replace coconut oil with unsaturated oils such as olive, sunflower, canola, or rice bran
- Swap all or half of the coconut milk or cream in a recipe with light evaporated milk
- When a recipe requires coconut milk or cream, choose a 'light' variety or use evaporated milk with a few drops of coconut essence to get the coconut flavour.

For more information, here is an article from the Dietitians Association of Australia on Coconut oil:

<https://daa.asn.au/smart-eating-for-you/smart-eating-fast-facts/food-and-food-products/the-facts-on-coconut-oil-is-it-the-best-choice/>