

HEALTH FEATURE

Going loco over THE COCO

NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION OF COCONUT WATER

Per 100 ml, bottled
Energy: 20kcal
Carbohydrates: 5-6g
Sugar: 4-5g
Potassium: 200-250mg

Per 100ml, from actual fruit
Energy: 20kcal
Carbohydrates: 5-6g
Sugar: 2.5-3g
Potassium: 250mg

Source: Clinical dietitian Jaclyn Reutens and Health Promotion Board

We check in with the experts to see if coconut water is as healthy as it claims to be

Since the start of this year, I've seen a growing number of fellow gym goers sipping from bottles of branded coconut water in between workouts and especially after exercise routines.

As someone who hydrates mainly with plain water, I couldn't help but wonder if coconut water was another fitness fad or simply a health trend I've yet to catch on.

Nonetheless, a number of coconut water brands have been popping up in Singapore, signifying the drink's growing popularity.

In fact, various gyms and fitness studios, such as Upside Motion and Crucycle, have been spotted with mini fridges stocked full of packaged coconut water, with each bottle retailing for at least \$2.

HEALTH CLAIMS

To many gym goers, coconut water is a "great source of rehydration" and a "good alternative to isotonic drinks".

In fact, the brands themselves have been touting their products as being "jam-packed with electrolytes", "containing more potassium than a banana", "fat-free", "cholesterol-free" and so on.

But how true are these claims?

According to dietitian Lauren Ho, coconut water is a good source of electrolytes, especially potassium, and is naturally fat-free and cholesterol-free.

However, the claim that coconut water contains more potassium than a banana is not entirely true.

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Clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants Jaclyn Reutens explains, "A regular banana contains about 360mg of potassium per 100g, whereas bottled coconut water contains about 200-300mg of potassium per 100ml.

"Coconut water is mainly a source of fluid, potassium and sugar. Any other nutrients found are in negligible amounts," she says.

And if you think consuming the fruit beats the packaged drink in terms of health benefits, think again — coconut flesh is high in fat while the coconut water alone is naturally fat-free.

Still, for those who need to have their fix of coconut water, moderation is key.

Ms Ho says, "There aren't any existing guidelines on the recommended daily intake of coconut water. But my advice is to always

choose plain water first and if you crave for something a little sweeter, then have the occasional drink of coconut water."

But do not mistake coconut water for coconut milk, she warns. Made from the flesh of the fruit, coconut milk is high in calories, total fat and saturated fat.

"People with heart disease should limit their intake of coconut milk as a high intake of saturated fat may increase their LDL cholesterol (or "bad" cholesterol) and risk for heart disease," she says.

Compared to coconut milk which has about 600 calories per cup and 57g of fat, unflavoured natural coconut water is fat-free and has about 45 calories per cup.

NECESSARY HYDRATION?

Keeping ourselves well-hydrated is a must. But can coconut water ever replace water as the recommended fluid of choice, even post-exercise?

The answer is a firm no, say both dietitians.

"Water is enough to replace body fluids lost after a bout of moderate-intensity exercise. But sports or isotonic drinks may be needed for prolonged endurance exercises of an hour or more," says Ms Ho.

The reason, Ms Reutens explains, is because the body has enough reserves to replace any carbohydrates and electrolytes lost during short bouts of exercises.

But an isotonic drink is needed for longer exercises as it helps the body facilitate fluid and electrolyte replacement.

Ms Reutens says, "An isotonic drink provides 6-8 per cent carbohydrates with small amounts of potassium and sodium.

That formulation allows the nutrients to be immediately absorbed into the intestinal tract and used by the body."

However, coconut water is not designed in the same manner.

"While the drink does contain those nutrients, its concentration is not the same as isotonic beverages. It also does not hydrate as quickly. You may replace an isotonic drink with coconut water but the effectiveness is not the same," says Ms Reutens.

By Samantha Francis

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