

The Wonder Oil You're Probably Not Giving to Your Pet

This oil is a powerful anti-inflammatory, and a terrific way to support your pet's immune system and overall health, but it's been given a bad rap in recent years. Not only is it one of the best topical therapies, but it's also excellent for brushing teeth, staving off doggy dementia and much more.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Carmina O'Connor and Charisa Antigua are twin sisters and the entrepreneurs behind CocoTherapy, a line of organic coconut oil products
- In the Philippines, Carmina and Charisa were raised with an understanding of the nourishing and healing properties of coconut oil; now in the U.S., the sisters have grown their family's third generation business into a flourishing enterprise
- Coconut oil can be used to soothe and heal a wide range of skin issues in pets; given orally, it offers tremendous health benefits thanks to its anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal properties
- MCT oil is also beneficial for slowing canine cognitive decline and can help reduce seizure potential in epileptic dogs

I met identical twins Charisa Antigua and Carmina O'Connor, the **ladies of CocoTherapy** over 20 years ago when they became my veterinary clients in the Chicago area. Over the years, I've also had the pleasure of watching these two entrepreneurial ladies grow their family enterprise into the flourishing business it is today.

Following are some highlights from an interview I did with the ladies in 2020. You can download the full transcript at the link above.

Coconut Oil Is Both Food and Medicine

Carmina's and Charisa's family has been growing coconuts and making coconut oil and other coconut products for over three generations.

"When we were kids, we'd be in my grandma's kitchen watching her make coconut oil every day," explains Carmina. "She used it for everything. It was her first aid kit in a jar. She used it for every ailment — not just for us, but for all our pets and the animals on our farm. She used it as both food and medicine. So, we grew up with the knowledge that coconut oil nourishes and heals."

Charisa and Carmina are from the Philippines, where coconuts are abundant and a part of everyone's diet. And I have personally experienced the benefits of coconut oil and seen it work firsthand in my practice with lymphangiectasia,¹ protein losing enteropathy² and lymphatic support, among a variety of other conditions.

When coconut oil first became a thing here in the U.S. people were curious about it but had questions about its safety. Gradually it gained general acceptance. But in the last few years I've noticed sort of a backlash — a return to the "it's not healthy" theme, especially for pets.

When Charisa and Carmina also started hearing concerns about coconut oil, it was almost a culture shock.

"Where we grew up, in the Philippines, farmers and people with pets were poor and couldn't afford to go to a veterinarian or even a doctor," says Carmina. "Or get antibiotics," Charisa adds.

Most animals in the Philippines don't get antibiotics, or antiviral or antifungal medications — they get coconut oil. Coconut oil is the "medication" they're treated with. "And it works," says Charisa. Also, whereas here in the U.S. livestock are given antibiotics in their feed, animals in the Philippines get coconut oil instead. It's a staple among veterinarians there as well.

Charisa remembers one of the first times they brought a bottle of coconut oil to a pet show in New York:

"People kept asking 'What is that? Is that lard?' They just couldn't get their head around it. They thought maybe we applied it like suntan oil. When we explained that we feed it orally, they couldn't get their head around it. They thought it was so unhealthy."

"I don't know if you remember, Dr. Becker," says Carmina, "but one of our Yorkies you treated, Violet, had severe allergies and you recommended coconut oil. We thought you were a trailblazer! You knew of its health benefits. You told us allergies are the result of an overactive immune system and you recommended coconut oil."

"And we thought, 'She knows something about coconut oil,'" Charisa adds. "We were really shocked! It's the first time we'd heard someone in the U.S. — someone outside our family — recommend it."

Much More Than a Skin Treatment

I put coconut oil in my hair every day. I put it on my face. I slather it everywhere. With pets, I use it for hot spots, cracked nails, cracked heels, dry noses, crusty "old dog skin," itchy cat bellies and more. It's one of the best topical remedies ever.

I think most people get the benefits of coconut oil applied topically, but when it comes to feeding it to pets, it's a different story.

"You're right," says Carmina. "People use it to brush their dog's teeth or clean their ears, but when it comes to feeding it, that's where they have a problem. It's important to understand that coconut oil is rich in triglycerides that are very healthy — mainly caprylic, capric and lauric acid — which are the three most functional and beneficial medium chain fatty acids in coconut oil."

Caprylic acid is an antifungal known to kill fungi and yeast, and when given orally, it can help control systemic yeast issues in animals. Capric acid converts to monocaprin when it's consumed, which has antiviral properties. Lauric acid converts to monoglyceride monolaurin, which has anti-bacterial properties. These three fatty acids in coconut oil are what make it so beneficial for health."

"It's also important to note," adds Charisa, "that capric and caprylic acids are the smaller of the medium chain fatty acids, and because they're smaller, the liver can convert them to ketones at a much faster rate. So, if you take caprylic C8 and capric C10, in about an hour and a half, the ketone levels in your blood are fully elevated. However, in three hours it's out of your system.

Lauric acid is a slightly bigger medium chain fatty acid, C12, so it will convert to ketones at a slightly slower rate of three hours, but it stays in your system for eight hours. You can sustain your blood ketone levels a lot longer with lauric acid.

But, if you look at the nutritional value of coconut oil, it isn't particularly rich in phytonutrients or vitamins and minerals, though it does contain trace amounts of iron, vitamin K, vitamin E, and phytosterols. That's why we don't give coconut oil to supply vitamins and minerals to pets. Instead, we give it as a therapeutic supplement to help support animals with, for example, lipid disorders or pancreatitis."

In human medicine, there's also a vast amount of research on the amazing benefits of coconut oil to improve cognitive function, with studies in other species also being conducted, including dogs with cognitive dysfunction syndrome³ and epilepsy.^{4,5} In one **study**, senior beagles fed a diet supplemented with MCTs had significant improvements in brain function. Research also shows low carb diets with added MCT oil can be beneficial for reducing seizures in dogs.

Carmina had an older Chihuahua, Lucy, who was beginning to do things like stare at walls and bark at nothing — common signs of doggy dementia. Carmina gave her coconut oil because it seemed to improve the situation. Lucy became much more alert.

Coconut Oil Shouldn't Replace Other Dietary Oils

Coconut oil works in many positive ways inside the body, for example, it helps to support a healthy immune system and is a powerful anti-inflammatory. But it's important for people to know that it doesn't take the place of other important oils, such as fish oil (DHA and EPA) or flaxseed oil (supply essential alpha linolenic acid). These are very different types of oils.

"Totally different," says Charisa. "Fish oil is a long chain polyunsaturated fat, so it's processed in the body very differently. There are overlapping benefits, for example, both coconut and fish oil support brain and heart health, but they do so in very different ways.

Coconut oil converts to ketones, which feed the brain. It reduces the formation of amyloid plaques in the brain, the substances that cause Alzheimer's, and it reduces brain inflammation.

The omega-3 essential fatty acids in fish oil form neurotransmitters to improve brain function. And coconut oil, unlike fish oil, is highly tolerated by animals with lipid disorders. So, there are inherent differences between fish oil and coconut oil. You don't have to stop giving one or the other. It's a good idea to rotate oils."

With regard to coconut oil and pets who need low-fat diets, for example, animals with lymphangiectasia or protein losing enteropathy (PLE), irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) — you can absolutely put these patients on a low-fat diet and use coconut oil or MCTs as their source of therapeutic fats to help with those medical conditions.

If you have a severely debilitated animal who is highly intolerant to fats and needs an ultra-low-fat diet, it's best to go with an MCT oil that contains around 93% medium chain triglycerides vs. virgin coconut oil, which is comprised of 63% medium chain triglycerides.

Thankfully, the instances in which pet parents should not consider using supplemental MCTs are few and far between. In cases of severe dysbiosis or microbiome imbalances, limited research suggests added fats, including coconut oil, may exacerbate these conditions.

Final Thoughts

"If you're wary about coconut oil, dig in and understand the science," suggests Charisa. "Because that's what it is. It's not snake oil, it's science. It's about the way medium chain fats are broken down in the body, the way the liver functions, and much more. Once you understand the science, you'll be less afraid of it."

Carmina adds that once the benefits of coconut oil began to be known, it became almost a situation of too-good-to-be-true. It actually has so many health benefits that people decided it was starting to seem a lot like snake oil or "voodoo medication."

"I think part of what caused the recent backlash," she explains, "is that all the promise of coconut oil makes it seem too good to be true."

I agree with this. I think here in the U.S., it's considered kind of a new age, fad supplement. But other civilizations have used coconuts and coconut oil throughout history. What appears to be a trendy fad in the U.S. is actually an ancient, healthy food that other cultures have relied on for themselves and their animals for thousands of years.

I think if people do their own research and talk to knowledgeable people, they'll get more comfortable using it. Of course, once you start using it, you can't stop. It helps with one condition, so you use it for something else, and then something else. And then, as you mentioned, Carmina, you end up using coconut oil with all your pets because you see the amazing benefits from nose to tail.

Many thanks to Carmina and Charisa for sharing their wisdom and expertise on all things coconut oil! You can visit their website, **[CocoTherapy](#)**, to learn much more about them.

Sources and References

¹ [Can Vet J. 2005 Dec; 46\(12\): 1138–1142](#)

² [Small Animal Clinical Nutrition, January 2010](#)

³ [Pan, Y. Nutrients, Cognitive Function, and Brain Aging: What We Have Learned from Dogs, Med Sci \(Basel\). 2021 Dec; 9\(4\): 72](#)

⁴ [Berk, B.A. et al. J Vet Intern Med, 2020 May;34\(3\):1248-1259](#)

⁵ [Berk, B.A. et al. Epilepsy Behav, 2021 Jan;114\(Pt A\):107608](#)
