I recently heard two Adventists disagreeing about coconut oil. Could you give your opinion?

Well, as you know, we are not nutritionists, and often defer to the GC Nutritional Council on these topics. But I don’t find a report from them.

All food fats are mixtures of different kinds. Saturated fats, as a rule of thumb, are found predominantly in animal products, and tend to raise cholesterol.

Those tropical fats—palm, palm kernel oil, and coconut oil—are high in saturated fats, thereby differing from most vegetable oils.

In the 1980s Phil Sokolof blamed these oils for heart attacks, and most nutritionists recommended not using them. Now Bruce Fife, a naturopath, has written a book, *The Coconut Oil Miracle*, which makes claims that coconut is more than healthful, and that it prevents heart disease, diabetes, chronic diseases, arthritis, etc.

Whenever you read about “miracle” foods of any kind, be very cautious. Such talk is hyperbole, and is aimed at selling something.

Tropical oils differ from other animal saturated fats, but still contain loads of calories. So beware! They must be used very sparingly if we expect to keep trim. Some studies suggest these tropical oils may slightly lower blood glucose, and blood cholesterols do not seem to be high in populations using them. These populations tend to be more active, and have other dietary differences from their American counterparts. So it may be lifestyle, not the type of oil, that is lowering the cholesterol.

Current thinking is that tropical oils may not be as bad as was first made out. However, as with all oils, remember that sparing use is recommended. In fact, the oils in whole foods such as nuts and avocado come with their appropriate cofactors, such as lignans that enhance their benefits, and are the recommended way to take our fats.

We still recommend unsaturated fats as the best. Thus, olive oil, canola oil, flax seed oil, sunflower seed oil, walnut oil, etc., are great if you need that little dab on the salad. But a little of the tropical oils likely won’t hurt, either. Remember, fat has nine calories per gram, a real problem if you want to watch your waistline. A tablespoon of most oils will pack 120 calories.

I have osteoarthritis, and recently bought a bottle of glucosamine and chondroitin to see
if it would help. I read it came from shellfish. What do you think about it?

Well, there are millions of people with osteoarthritis—20 million in the United States. So a product that is “natural,” doesn’t irritate the stomach, and has no questions over its head like some of the cox-2 inhibitors (remember Vioxx and Bextra?) sounds great. It contains an amino sugar extracted from crustacean shells, which is found in cartilage.

If it were demonstrated to be highly effective, we would not be overly concerned that it was derived from crustaceans. Glucose is glucose, regardless of where it comes from. And taking a chemical compound is not like eating the animal. However, we are not sure it is efficacious.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is conducting a large study that involves 1,600 patients with osteoarthritis. They have broken the group into subsections, and randomly assigned them to five treatment protocols. One group took a placebo (unknowingly); one group, celecoxib (a cox inhibitor); one group, glucosamine (1,500 mg/day); one group, chondroitin sulfate (1,200 mg/day); and the last group both chondroitin and glucosamine.

The study is not finished, but the initial findings suggest that, as far as pain is concerned, overall these products are no better than a placebo.

The next phase of the study will look at X-ray studies to see if the joint spaces are better preserved. But we would think you could spend the cash on a better diet—how about some blueberries, raspberries, and some nuts?

I am a 76-year-old man. I was diagnosed with prostate cancer that was successfully treated at Loma Linda University Medical Center. I developed lymphoma, and then bladder cancer. I have a strong family history of cancer, so I’m not too surprised. Since I became sick, many friends are calling and recommending their favorite extract of fruits, juices, or so-called nutrients. What is your opinion of these products?

Your question is being answered because we think that it is one that many people face. We would like to address a couple of issues.

First, the church is a fellowship of believers, and we expect we will openly communicate our ideas with each other. It is not, however, a “captive” market. Often in our travels we see pastors, pastors’ wives, church elders, and members who engage in the sale of a product or program, and use the congregation as a target market. We believe it is unethical to use one’s position of trust in the church to promote products for gain. We also recognize there are good products, but the “use” of church members as part of a “sales force” to enrich producers of these products is unethical.

The second issue revolves around the effectiveness of many of these so-called nutrients or supplements. Because “natural” plant substances are not regulated by a government agency in the United States, one has difficulty in several areas. Standardization of the quality of products is not currently required, nor is the amount of a given ingredient. This means great variation—and even contamination of the product—can occur between different manufacturers. Rigorous testing of products is seldom performed, and claims of “scientific” studies are often references to “in-house” studies of insufficient size and quality to warrant the claims being made. Use of testimonials and pyramid sales schemes should alert the consumer to serious likelihood that a given product is too good to be true.

A liberal diet inclusive of whole, unprocessed foods of a wide variety is the best protection a person has when it comes to lifestyle issues. Cooked tomatoes contain lycopene, which may have prostate cancer-protective qualities. But prevention is totally different from treatment. We suggest spending your money on making your diet highly nutritious, and following the advice of a well-qualified medical practitioner. Well-meaning friends can cause a lot of anxiety, and would often do best to keep their advice to themselves. Free advice is sometimes worth about as much as you pay for it. Yes, you can think that about our column, if you’d like—but at least we hope you pay for your subscription!
Keep your courage up! Hope and belief strengthen our ability to cope with the difficulties such as you are facing. We know the good Lord loves you!