

Nuts

It has recently been suggested that nuts may be considered a “health food.” During the recent low-fat craze, Americans were convinced that nuts were too high in fat to include in a healthy diet. The fact that they are excellent sources of protein, minerals (magnesium and copper), "good" monounsaturated fats, vitamin E, folic acid, fiber, and naturally occurring cholesterol-lowering compounds called plant sterols, as well as quite low in “artery-clogging” saturated fats and therefore good for the heart, was not ever mentioned.

Several studies over the past several years have shown the health benefits of nuts:

- The Nurses’ Health Study found that women who ate 5 ounces or more of nuts per week reduced their risk of dying from heart disease by 35%. The researchers also noted that the nurses who were nut-eaters tended to weigh less than the nurses who did not eat nuts (*BMJ* 1998;317:1341-1345).
- In the Iowa Women’s Health Study, women who ate nuts or seeds more than 4 times a week were 40% less likely to die of coronary heart disease than similar women who didn’t eat nuts (*N Engl J Med* 1996;334: 1156-1162).
- 31,000 Seventh-Day Adventists who ate nuts more than 4 times a week were half as likely to die of a heart attack as those who ate nuts less than once a week (*Arch Intern Med* 1992;152:1416-1424).
- In the Physicians’ Health Study, men who ate nuts at least twice a week had half the rate of sudden cardiac death as men who rarely or never ate nuts (*Arch Intern Med* 2002;162:1382-1387).
- A study in *Circulation* (2004;109:1609-1614) reported that when walnuts were substituted for about one third of the calories supplied by olives and other monounsaturated fats, the elasticity of the arteries increased by 64%, and levels of vascular cell adhesion molecules were reduced.

Many studies using peanuts, walnuts, almonds, macadamia nuts, pecans, pistachios, and hazelnuts showed that diets containing nuts or nut butters lowered LDL cholesterol levels by about 10 to 15 points. In addition, nuts may help dilate blood vessels due to the presence of the amino acid arginine, which may help to lower elevated blood pressure levels. Certain nuts like pecans, walnuts, and almonds contain tryptophan, an amino acid that stimulates the production of serotonin in the brain, which can improve depression and promote relaxation. While nuts are calorically dense and easy to overeat, they are also a satisfying snack. It has been suggested that people trying to lose weight who eat nuts tend to be more compliant with their diets because the fat and fiber content of nuts makes them very filling.

An ounce of nuts is usually equal to about 170 to 180 calories. Sample amounts are approximately 20 almonds, 15 cashews, 18 hazelnuts, or 10 walnut halves. The best way to add nuts to your diet is to eat them *instead* of other foods, especially ones that contain heart-damaging fat (cakes, cookies, chips, etc.). Portion control is key. Here are some ways to add healthy "nut" fat to your diet:

- Top hot or cold cereal with nuts.
- Sprinkle almonds on top of yogurt.
- Add nuts to your salads.
- Use nuts to replace croutons in salads or soups.
- Sprinkle pine nuts on pasta.
- Add slivered almonds to chicken salad.

- Add nuts to quick breads such as pancakes, waffles, or muffins.
- Add a handful of nuts to steamed veggies.

All nuts are healthy, but walnuts and almonds have particular benefit:

- Walnuts, a great source of omega-3 essential fatty acids, are heart-protective, promote better cognitive function, and provide anti-inflammatory benefits. Walnuts also contain the antioxidant compound ellagic acid, known to fight cancer and support the immune system. In a study reported in *Phytochemistry* (2003;63:795-801), researchers identified 16 polyphenols in walnuts, including three new tannins, with “remarkable” antioxidant activity.
- Almonds, one of the best nuts for lowering cholesterol, are rich in many nutrients: potassium, manganese, copper, vitamin E, selenium, magnesium, and calcium. One-fourth cup of almonds contains almost as much calcium as a ¼ cup of milk.