

Nuts

Nut consumption has decreased in Australia over the past 20 years. This might be because people believe nuts are high in fat. However, recent studies have shown that nuts can protect against heart disease and, possibly, diabetes. If eaten as part of a healthy diet, they do not appear to contribute to overweight or obesity. In one study, eating a handful of nuts five times per week was found to halve the risk of heart disease.

Nutritional make-up of nuts

Different types of nuts contain different nutrients, but generally nuts contain:

- Low levels of saturated fats.
- High levels of mono-unsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.
- No cholesterol.
- Phytochemicals, such as phytoestrogens (isoflavones) and phenolic compounds, ellagic acid and flavonoids.
- Dietary fibre.
- Plant protein, which makes them a good alternative to meat; nuts are also high in the amino acid arginine.
- Vitamins E, B6, niacin and folic acid.
- Minerals such as magnesium, zinc, iron, calcium, copper, selenium and potassium.

Nuts and heart disease

Low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol is considered the 'bad' cholesterol. It can contribute to the build-up of plaque inside the arteries; this causes them to become narrow (atherosclerosis) and can lead to heart disease.

Increases in LDL cholesterol are mainly caused by saturated fats. Eating nuts seems to help lower LDL cholesterol levels and help to maintain healthy blood vessels. This may have something to do with their high content of mono-unsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, antioxidant phytochemicals, vitamins and minerals, the vitamin folate and the amino acid arginine.

Exceptions to the healthy rule

Most nuts – including almonds, walnuts, pecans, cashews, brazil nuts, chestnuts, hazelnuts, peanuts and pistachios – contain mainly mono-unsaturated fats. However, coconut and palm nuts contain high levels of saturated fats; consumption of these should be limited.

Nuts, obesity and diabetes

Dietary fats are energy dense, with twice the amount of kilojoules per gram (37kJ) than either protein (17kJ) or carbohydrate (16kJ). People who are overweight and obese can still benefit from the protective properties of nuts, without associated weight gain, if they swap them for existing food intake (in moderate amounts) instead of eating high fat processed snack foods. Some nuts contain more fat than others, but varieties such as almonds and chestnuts have comparatively low amounts of fat.

Nuts and allergy

Peanuts – and to a lesser extent brazil nuts, almonds and hazelnuts – can cause acute allergy in some people, particularly young children. This can be life threatening. Young children with a predisposition to allergies should avoid peanuts and other types of nuts as, once developed, this allergy will probably persist into adulthood.

Recommendations on nut intake

Research studies have shed new light on the role of nuts in protecting us against heart disease and diabetes. As a result, recommendations regarding nuts have recently changed. Probably the best advice is to have a handful (nine to 15 nuts) of a variety of nuts daily, especially walnuts and almonds.

Hints on how to include nuts in your diet

Instead of eating a biscuit or piece of cake as a snack, try having a handful of plain unroasted nuts. Combining nuts with low energy-dense foods (such as vegetables) in meals is a good way to eat them – for example, in Asian style dishes or added to a salad.

Vegetarians, vegans or people who avoid red meat need to eat nuts almost daily because nuts are a good substitute for meat (they contain protein, fat, iron, zinc and niacin). For example, ½ cup of nuts or ¼ cup of seeds or two tablespoons of nut and seed spreads like peanut butter or sesame seed paste (tahini) are equivalent to a serve of meat.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia

Things to remember

- Nuts are a healthy food and a good source of protein and healthy fats.
- Nuts contain mono-unsaturated fats, polyunsaturated fats and other compounds that influence blood cholesterol.
- People who are overweight or obese can eat nuts in moderation instead of high fat, processed foods in the diet.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Deakin University - School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences

Copyright © 1999/2010 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.