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Nutrition Notes: Nuts for Your Health

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Bi-sek Hsiao

Fall and winter are the seasons for nuts! As squirrels stash away nuts to eat for the winter, and black bears gorge on them to build fat stores in preparation for hibernation, we should also consider nuts as a healthful part of our diet.

Most nuts are the seeds of fruit from trees, with the exception of peanuts, which grow underground from a legume plant. We are lucky to live in a country that grows many types of nuts: Peanuts are grown primarily in southern states including Georgia, Alabama, Florida, the Carolinas, and Texas; California is the top producer of tree nuts like almonds, walnuts, and pistachios; Georgia, New Mexico, and Texas are the main producers of pecans.

More than four decades of research suggests that our health, especially our heart health, could benefit from eating 28-30 grams of nuts a day, which is about 1 oz of nuts, or a quarter cup “handful.” A 1 oz portion is approximately 24 almonds, 14 walnut halves, 19 pecan halves, 18 cashews, 6 Brazil nuts, 49 pistachios, 11 macadamia nuts, or 28 peanuts.

Nuts are packed full of healthful nutrition. As a rich source of energy, providing about 160-200 calories per ounce, eating them can bring a sense of fullness and reduce cravings. Nuts are a rich source of unsaturated fats (mono- and poly-unsaturated fatty acids) while having lower amounts of saturated fat; this supports lowering LDL “bad” cholesterol and raising HDL “good” cholesterol. Fiber and plant sterols in nuts are also helpful in improving cholesterol levels. A 1 oz serving of nuts provides a decent amount of protein, about 10% of average daily needs. Nuts have high amounts of arginine, an amino acid that the body uses to make nitric oxide, a chemical that helps relax blood vessels and improve blood flow. Nuts also contain minerals like potassium, magnesium, copper, and selenium (in Brazil nuts), as well as vitamin E and other antioxidant compounds to nourish the body, support metabolism, and reduce inflammation. Since nuts are low in carbohydrates and contain protein and fiber that support blood sugar control, they can be a good choice for people with diabetes.

In a 2022 comprehensive review of evidence on health outcomes associated with eating nuts, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Advances in Nutrition*, researchers concluded that eating 28g of nuts a day compared to not eating nuts was associated with a 21% reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, 11% reduced risk of cancer deaths, and 22% reduced risk of death from any cause. Eating nuts was also associated with lower risk of dying from respiratory diseases, infectious diseases, and diabetes. Although the relationship between eating nuts and developing diabetes was less conclusive, the evidence showed a favorable trend for improving fasting blood sugar levels, blood sugar control, and the body’s sensitivity in responding to insulin. Despite their high calorie content, eating nuts did not lead to weight gain or obesity in studies, likely

due to their ability to help you feel full and reduce cravings.

The freshness of nuts is important for enjoying their health-promoting qualities. The high oil content of nuts makes them susceptible to becoming rancid and deteriorating quickly, so it’s important to have a trusted source and pay attention to storage conditions and shelf life. Shelf life depends on many variables including the type of nut and conditions during harvest, processing, transportation, and storage. Nuts stored in shells generally have a longer shelf life. Ideal storage conditions are low temperatures (4-15°C), low moisture (2.5%), low relative humidity (40-60%), limited exposure to oxygen, and dark conditions. Storing them in the refrigerator in a dark, tight container is a good idea and will maximize the quality. Refrigerated nuts should last for about 6 months. Although there’s not much research about freezing nuts, many people claim that nuts will last even longer when frozen, up to a year or more.

There are many ways to enjoy nuts regularly. If you have tooth issues that make it hard to chew nuts, blending nuts into a powder or using nut butters are good options. Nuts are wonderful as snacks, as a straight-up handful, combined with other ingredients in a trail mix, or paired with fruit or crackers. Nuts also go well on top of yogurt parfaits

or in cold or hot cereals. Nuts can be blended into smoothies for added protein and healthy fats. Blended into pasta sauces, nuts can be a hidden ingredient to increase nutrition, or highlighted for flavor and thickness, such as in a pesto or peanut sauce. Adding nuts to rice or stir fry, or tossing them into salads, are also great ways to enhance flavors, add crunch, and make meals more appealing and filling. Ground or

powdered nuts can supplement or replace flour in baking recipes, such as in pie crusts and cookies. Also, don’t forget the classic peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Adding nuts to snacks, meals, and desserts can give your body many of the nutrients it needs while protecting your heart and helping you stay fuller for longer. Of course, if you are among the unfortunate 1-2% of the population with an allergy to nuts, please avoid nuts and find alternatives for your diet. Otherwise, consider following the lead of squirrels and bears this winter season by incorporating nuts into your meals. Your health will thank you.

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Salad with fruit, cheese, and nuts

Ingredients:

For the salad: 5 cups of baby spinach or spring greens (about 1 package); 2 small apples, cut into thin slices; 1 cup grapes, sliced lengthwise; 1/4 cup crumbled feta; 1/2 cup toasted walnut halves or other nuts of choice.

For the balsamic vinaigrette: 3 tablespoons olive oil; 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar; 1 minced garlic clove; 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard; salt and pepper to taste.

Instructions:

- 1) In a large bowl, toss greens together with apples and grapes.
- 2) Combine dressing ingredients, whisk until smooth.
- 3) Pour dressing over the salad, toss, and top with feta cheese and nuts.