Go NUTS For Your Health!

By Brooke Robinson

Two servings of nuts a day: the easiest and most delicious prescription to follow for a healthier heart, better weight control, and decreased risk of diseases such as cardiovascular disease and cancer. Health professionals all over the world are beginning to emphasize eating nuts as part of a healthy diet. Almonds, Brazil nuts, peanuts, pistachios, macadamia nuts, cashews, pine nuts, walnuts; all of these yummy morsels are packed with tasty, health-promoting nutrients that will bring joy to both your taste buds, and your body.

**Why are nuts so healthy?**

Nuts contain large quantities of monounsaturated fats, folate, vitamin E, fiber, and protein, all of which are necessary for bodily processes, and contribute their own specific health benefits.

**Healthy Fats**

Many people see the nutrition label on a jar of peanut butter or can of almonds and are turned off by the high fat and calorie content. Don’t get caught in this trap! Nuts have high levels of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats that are essential to good health, and are low in saturated fat, the kind that is usually linked to heart disease and other health problems. Research has found that those who consume nuts on a regular basis (at least 5 servings a week) are 35% less likely to have a heart attack than those who rarely ate nuts.¹ Monounsaturated fats, found in high doses in macadamias, almonds, and cashews, are known to decrease your cholesterol levels, leading to a lower risk for development of heart disease and stroke. Nuts are also high in polyunsaturated fats, mainly in the form of linoleic acid (an omega-6 fatty acid), which is not synthesized by the body. Omega-6’s need to be consumed from things like walnuts and Brazil nuts so we can avoid the negative symptoms of deficiency.

**Vitamin E**

Vitamin E is an important antioxidant that keeps our cells and tissues safe from harmful, oxidative agents that could potentially cause cancer in the body. Almonds are exceptionally good sources of vitamin E, providing over 100% of your daily value in one 100 gram serving.² Other nuts that are vitamin E-dense include hazelnuts and pistachios.²
Protein
If you consume a largely plant-based diet, nuts provide an excellent source of protein. Nuts highest in protein (per 100 gram serving) include walnuts (15 g), almonds (20 g), Brazil nuts (14 g), cashews (18 g), and hazelnuts (15 g).² Nuts are also a healthier alternative to other saturated fat-dense protein sources such as red meat.

Fiber
Fiber is the part of plant foods that cannot be digested. It clings on to water in our digestive system and gives us the feeling that we are full, causing us to eat less, and better maintain our weight. Studies have reported that people who eat nuts more frequently are at a much lower risk for gaining weight, and typically have a lower body-mass index, despite nuts having a high fat content.² In addition to weight management, fiber also helps lower blood cholesterol levels, promoting heart health.

Fiber is also important in regulating blood sugar. The fiber in peanuts absorbs some of sugars that are eaten along with it, lowering blood glucose spikes after a meal. Because of their low glycemic index, nuts are a good options for people with diabetes.

Folate
Vitamin B9, otherwise known as folate, is essential for cell synthesis and tissue repair in the body, playing a protective role against cancer development. Folate is found in the highest amounts in almonds, peanuts, and walnuts.²

How Can I Eat More Nuts?
As a nut butter and overall nut-eating addict, getting my two servings a day of nuts is no problem for me. A serving of nuts is about 1 oz., or a handful. If you're eating a nut butter, the serving is 2 tablespoons, which is approximately equivalent to the size of your thumb. Here are some simple things I do to include nuts in my everyday meals and snacking.

Adding nuts to salad provides a nice crunch without being overpowering. Try adding sliced almonds, chopped walnuts or macadamias, or pine nuts to your next salad along with some berries for a yummy contrast in textures.
Eating foods with nut butter is a super quick and easy way to get in your protein for a simple snack. Cut up an apple, some celery sticks, or a banana, and dip in 2 tablespoons of peanut butter or almond butter for added sweet and saltiness.

Mix nuts into yogurt or oatmeal. Breakfast is a great time to load up on protein and fiber to get the day started off right. Add almonds or walnuts to your yogurt with a chopped apple, or put a spoonful of your favorite nut butter on top of your morning oats for a nice creamy texture.

Make your own trail mix! Buying nuts in bulk is cost-effective, and you can customize your own trail mixes depending on what you're in the mood for that day. Mix almonds, peanuts, cashews, or Brazil nuts, with sunflower or pumpkin seeds and dried fruit like cranberries or raisins. Add in some chocolate chips if you're feeling extra sweet! Trail mix is a great, energy-dense, protein-packed snack for on-the-go eating.

Simply snack. Nuts are a great snack to keep in your desk drawer or in your car. If you're feeling hungry and looking for a little pick-me-up, snack on a handful of pistachios or roasted almonds to keep you full and satisfied.

Are You A Health Nut Yet?

With all of the health-promoting benefits that they have to offer, along with their delicious taste and versatility, nuts make the perfect addition to any snack or meal. It is easy to fit in your 2 servings of nuts a day. From pistachios to walnuts, and peanuts to cashews, the possibilities are endless, and the health benefits are tremendous. Go nuts!

References