

Health Nuts

presented by the Salem Evening News

Do you go nuts over a handful of almonds or pecans, but worry about the excess fat and calories that nuts will bring to your diet? If so, you are not alone. Nuts have long held an ambiguous role in the world of nutrition: on the one hand, they can provide a concentrated source of nutrients such as protein and calcium. On the other hand they are loaded with fat and calories, which can easily sabotage even the most well intentioned diet, right?

Wrong. While nuts provide a concentrated source of nutrients, they can still be a delicious part of an overall eating plan for good health. A quick glance at nuts' nutritional value is impressive: nuts are rich in fiber, protein, calcium, folate, zinc, selenium, magnesium and vitamin E. Nuts also have zero cholesterol and some nuts, such as walnuts, contain omega-3 fatty acids which may be especially protective against heart disease and stroke.

Although ounce for ounce nuts do have a higher fat content than many other foods, most of this fat is unsaturated fat, which promotes heart health and helps to lower LDL ("bad") cholesterol. Coconut is the exception to the rule, as it has a large amount of artery-clogging saturated fat and should therefore be used sparingly.

Clinical research suggests that regular consumption of nuts (about 1 oz per day) may actually improve LDL levels and reduce the risk of heart attack. In the Harvard Nurses' Study researchers found that nurses who consumed at least 5 oz of nuts per week, or about 1 airline packet's worth per day, suffered one-third fewer heart attacks than subjects who rarely or never ate nuts. Another study reported similar reductions in LDL levels in subjects who consumed 68 grams (about 2.5 oz) of pecans per day for 8 weeks. When included as part of a well-balanced diet, nuts are not the nutritional bugaboo that many of us have been conditioned to believe.

To release their full flavor and aroma, toast nuts in the oven before you use them (you can also brown them lightly in a skillet sprayed with cooking spray). Experiment with cashews in stir-fries, add slivered almonds to vegetable dishes, include walnuts in your next batch of carrot or zucchini bread, top hot breakfast cereal with chopped nuts, or sprinkle nuts on salads and yogurt for a satisfying crunch. Try mixing nuts with an equal part of dried fruit for a take along snack that will last all month in a briefcase, backpack or a gym bag. You can also spread almond butter on your toast in the morning for a healthy change from regular butter.

From a practical standpoint, nuts are a compact food that packs plenty of nutrition with little fuss. Thus, nuts can be an ideal snack for people who may have trouble consuming enough calories, such as endurance athletes, growing teens, elderly persons, or strict vegetarians.



However, if you are concerned about keeping your waistline in check but want to enjoy the health benefits of nuts, portion control is the key. One-fourth cup of nuts (1 oz) counts as one serving of protein. Try measuring out your nuts ahead of time, and put individual portions in Ziploc bags or tiny Tupperware containers so that they are ready to go at a moments' notice (nuts can also be frozen for about 3 months).

Another waist-saving strategy is to find other places to trim excess calories and fat from meals in which you include nuts. When you add nuts to a salad, for example, use a low fat or fat free dressing and skip the high fat items like croutons and cheese. This will help to keep your total fat and calorie budget in check, and you will be increasing the amount of heart healthy fats, which is a step towards better health.

Choose raw nuts or unsalted nuts for maximum sodium control- you can experiment with making flavored combos such as spicy or sweet nuts for a change. And if you are one of those who are stuck on only one kind of nut, try experimenting with other types (or a mixed nut variety) for exposure to all of the different nutrients that different nuts provide. The possibilities are endless, so get cracking!

Nuts at a Glance

How does your favorite nut stack up in terms of calories and fat? Below is a list of common nuts and the amount of calories and fat found in a one ounce serving (about a handful).

Nut	Calories	Fat
Almonds, Dry Roasted	172	15.3 g
Cashews, Dry Roasted	163	13.2 g
Coconut, Dried	187	18.3* (16.3 g sat. fat)
Macadamia, Dry Roasted	169	14.6 g
Peanuts, Dry Roasted	164	13.9 g
Pistachios, Dry Roasted	172	15 g
Walnuts, Black Dried	172	16.1 g

Source: J. Pennington, Bowes and Church's Food Values of Portions Commonly Used, 16th edition. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1992.

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Mediterranean Lentil Salad with Toasted Almonds

- ¾ cup cracked bulgur wheat
- 3 cups lightly packed spinach leaves, cut into thin strips
- 1 cup dry lentils, rinsed and drained
- 2 teaspoons dried dill weed
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 8 oz plain, nonfat yogurt
- 1 ½ cups sliced onion
- salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 small red pepper, seeded and cut into ½ -inch squares
- 1/3 cup sliced almonds, toasted
- 2 large cloves garlic, minced

In a small bowl, cover bulgur wheat with boiling water; set aside 30 minutes. Meanwhile, in a 1- qt saucepan combine lentils and 2 cups water. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce heat and simmer about 20 minutes until lentils are tender; drain. Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add onion; saute 5 minutes. Mix in bell pepper and garlic; saute 5 minutes. Thoroughly drain bulgur wheat. Mix into skillet with lentils. Cook 5 minutes, tossing occasionally. Mix in spinach and dill. Cook 3 minutes, tossing occasionally. Mix in yogurt, heat thoroughly. Season with salt and pepper. Sprinkle with almonds. Serve with additional yogurt.

Makes 4 main-dish servings.

Toasting Instructions:

Spread almonds in a single layer in an ungreased baking pan. Place in 350 degree oven and bake 5-10 minutes or until almonds are slightly brown; stir once or twice until lightly toasted. Remove from pan to cool.

Each serving provides 460 calories, 13 grams fat, 1.5 grams saturated fat, 230 milligrams sodium, 13 grams fiber, 23 grams protein.

Recipe Source: American Dietetic Association, Nutrition Fact Sheet “Good News for Nut Lovers”, in association with the California Almond Board.

