

Live Healthy and Be Well!

“For good health – it’s okay to go nuts!”

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We continue the series about some things that seem to confer health benefits and may even prevent disease and prolong life. The idea comes from a book by Dr. Sanjiv Chopra titled *The Big 5* - which presents “...five simple things you can do to live a longer, healthier life.” For this month, let’s discuss the healthy benefits of eating nuts as a healthy snack. However, one caveat at the beginning – **if you have nut allergies, please do not consume nuts or nut products.**

Nuts have been part of the food chain for eons. Almonds are mentioned in the Old Testament, the Incas included peanuts as part of their burial rituals (so the departed would have a snack on their way to the afterlife), and Thomas Jefferson gave George Washington pecan trees from Monticello for his estate at Mount Vernon. So, nuts have been around a long time, and been part of mankind’s nutrition since the beginning. Nuts have even been used as currency in some past civilizations.

But, for a long time, many of us have been told not to eat them much as they are full of fat, cause weight gain, and such. Only recently have we begun to discover the good benefits of nuts, and how they are a powerhouse of nutrition and provide many good health benefits. We all enjoy nuts, and we will see that the type of nut you eat doesn’t really matter. In fact, the most popular “nut” in America is the peanut – which is technically NOT a nut – but a legume, more closely related to peas and beans.

Let’s say it’s the middle of the afternoon, quite a while til dinner, and you feel a bit hungry. Or, it’s late evening close to bedtime, and you have the munchies but don’t want to get full before going to sleep. What is your “go to” snack? You would do well to eat a handful or two of nuts and wash them down with a glass of cool water. This is certainly much healthier than potato chips, a bowl of ice cream, or any kind of sweet candy, cake, or pie.

Nuts are a lot of good things in a very small package. They contain protein, fiber, good fats, natural plant Omega-3 oils, anti-oxidants, Selenium, and Magnesium. They are low calorie – one pistachio is only about four calories. The type of nut you eat does not seem to matter with regards to the health benefits – so it is okay to enjoy a variety or just buy some mixed nuts. I would recommend the unsalted or lightly salted variety to be better for you. And, when we talk about a daily portion – we think about 2 to 3 ounces of nuts a day, or approximately one to two handfuls.

We have been conditioned to believe that things that taste good must not be good for us, so it comes as a pleasant surprise that a variety of nuts are now found to be very good for you in both the short and long run. In 1992, an article in *The Archives of Internal Medicine* reported that frequent nut consumption (at least four times a week) was found to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease across all genders and age groups. This study was confirmed by another reported

in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 1996 – post menopausal women who consumed nuts four times a week reduced risk of heart disease by 40%, and if they ate nuts five or more times a week – there was a 50% reduction. After several more studies, the evidence became such that the FDA allowed nut producers to put a claim on their packaging that “...consumption of nuts may help reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.”

Nuts have been found to be more beneficial than olive oil for patients with Metabolic Syndrome. This is a condition characterized by excess belly fat, high blood pressure, elevated blood sugar, and high cholesterol and triglycerides. These folks have increased risk of developing heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes. For this condition, a Mediterranean diet is recommended which involves replacing red meat with white, more fish, fruits and vegetables, aromatic herbs, and cooking with olive oil. It was found that people who followed this diet, and consumed nuts four or five times a week, had less risk of developing these dreaded conditions than those who followed the diet but did not eat nuts. Nuts have also been found to decrease the risk of developing type 2 diabetes across all groups.

In the United Kingdom, a study with a large group of subjects (which makes it more powerful and meaningful) found that eating nuts seems beneficial in preventing certain types of cancer, as well. The “Nurse’s Health Study” published in *The British Journal of Cancer* (2013) found that frequent nut consumption lowered the risk of pancreatic cancer in their group. Other studies have found reductions in both prostate cancer and colon cancer.

And finally, there is good published evidence that eating nuts frequently can help you to live longer across the board, also known as reducing the rate of “all-cause mortality.” However, as you can imagine, you cannot just live the way you want and eat nuts as a “magic pill” to help you be healthy. All the above findings assume that you try to be healthy and well. Smoking, excess weight, poor diet and nutrition, excessive alcohol consumption, and abuse of drugs, both legal and illegal – will take their toll even if you eat nuts. And, eating your nuts as peanut M&M’s or crushing them on a heaping bowl of ice cream with chocolate syrup will diminish the health effects that we have discussed.

However, if you need a healthy snack here and there, want something easy to pack and take on a hike or walk, or just need a little pick me up to take the edge off your hunger and maybe eat less at mealtime – be smart. Don’t reach for chips, candy, Cokes, or sweets – go nuts!

We really do enjoy hearing from you with any questions, concerns, or ideas for future columns and/or health and wellness related issues for the *Georgia Mountain Laurel*. Please send an email to rabundoctor@gmail.com, or call us at 706-782-3572, and we will be sure to consider your input. This and previous articles can be now be found on the web at www.rabundoctor.com in an archived format. If you use Twitter, then follow us for health tips and wellness advice @rabundoctor. Like and follow our Facebook page at facebook.com/rabundoctor. Until next month, live healthy and be well!

