

## Much Ado About Nutty

A high blood cholesterol level has long been known to contribute to cardiac risk; however, the proportions of the types of cholesterol that make up the total cholesterol are of more importance than total cholesterol alone. For example, a high proportion of low-density lipoprotein (LDL; “bad”) cholesterol increases the risk of heart disease, while a high proportion of high-density lipoprotein (HDL; “good”) cholesterol is protective.

Due to their high fat content, nuts have traditionally been viewed as an indulgent food. It is often believed that nuts are a source of cholesterol, but nuts are a plant food – they contain no cholesterol. They also offer protein, fibre, vitamin E, folate, and many other vitamins, minerals such as magnesium, zinc, selenium and phytochemicals. The fat content of most nuts consists of mainly polyunsaturated fats containing omega-3 fatty acids, monounsaturated fats, and are low in saturated fats.

In setting dietary recommendations the World Health Organisation has recommended a daily consumption of 400g of fruits and vegetables, which should include a 30g serving of nuts and seeds. This amount is about a quarter cup or 15-25 small nuts. In short a small handful.

Studies have shown that people who ate five or more servings of nuts per week experienced 50% fewer heart attacks than non-nut eaters. For example, walnuts are high in a polyunsaturated fat that contains omega-3 fatty acids. Studies also show that nuts contain polyphenols that are known to deter cancer. Peanuts are also rich in resveratrol, the same compound found in red wine.

Another study showed that people who supplemented their diet with 68g of pecan nuts everyday had lowered their LDL (bad cholesterol) levels by 6% at the end of an eight-week period, in comparison with non-nut eaters, who also happened to have a lower fat intake. Of subjects placed on a weight loss diet, those who could snack on nuts managed to maintain their weight loss beyond one year, whereas subjects on a low fat diet began to gain a small amount of weight back after a year.

While nuts may be good for you, there is a drawback that should be taken into account:

- Nuts are loaded with calories. A handful of nuts contain about 150 calories. So, while nuts should be strongly considered in a heart healthy diet, they shouldn't be added, they should be a **substitute** for another source of calories. Good candidates for foods you can swap with a tablespoon or two of nuts are: potato chips, butter, candy, ice cream, and any processed food (most of which are loaded with saturated fats.)

How to add nuts to your diet sensibly:

- Choosing cereals that contain nuts makes sense, but make sure the cereal isn't clogged up with saturated fats or trans fatty acids. Read the labels. (You're looking for the phrase “hydrogenated” or “partly hydrogenated” oils. If you see that the product is best avoided).
- Using chopped nuts makes a small amount go a long way. By combining nuts with lower fat foods you can get the best of both worlds. So, try peanuts in your stir-fry, almonds in your vegetables or pecans on top of your fruit salad.

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