

## **Nuts - Powerhouses of nutrition and prevention**

Written by Nicole Winbush MD  
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Nuts are rich sources of energy and protein and there is substantial evidence of their benefit for several health conditions. This week we talk about the benefits of nuts and why they are a high quality addition to everyone's diet.

### **What is considered a nut?**

The term nut is commonly used to refer to tree nuts (e.g. almonds, walnuts, cashews, pecans, brazil nuts, pistachios, etc.) and peanuts which are actually a type of bean. Nuts are rich in B vitamins and in the minerals such as Calcium, Potassium and Magnesium. Nuts are cholesterol free and are also high in antioxidants that are thought to play a role in protecting cells from damage which can make them more vulnerable to inflammatory changes that are involved in heart disease and other chronic conditions.

### **How to eat your nuts**

Since nuts are high in fat and calories, a little goes a long way. For most nuts, a serving size is considered to be 1 ounce or approximately a small handful of nuts. Nuts make an excellent between meal snack and consuming 1-2 servings of nuts per day will likely allow you to derive the nutritional and health benefits of nuts. There are a wide variety of nuts. To maintain the nutritional benefits of nuts, eat them in their least processed form. Whole nuts that are raw (or dry roasted) and minimally salted are best. For example, eating peanut butter that is laden with additional fats and sweeteners is not likely to be as beneficial as eating peanut butter that has not added oils or sweeteners. (Read your food labels!!)

### **Cholesterol lowering**

Nuts have been shown consistently to lower total cholesterol and LDL (bad) cholesterol levels and blood triglycerides (which are often elevated in individuals at risk for developing diabetes). Two servings (approximately 2 handfuls) of nuts per day can lower total cholesterol an average of 7% and LDL cholesterol 5%. The lowering can be higher in individuals who are starting with elevated cholesterol levels. While nuts are high in fat, much of this fat is in the form of healthy unsaturated fats which have been shown to have a favorable effect on blood cholesterol.

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### **Nuts are associated with decreased risk heart disease**

Long term epidemiologic studies where individuals were followed for several years have consistently shown that regular nut intake is associated with a sizable (~ 35% ) decreased risk for heart disease. The benefits of nuts appear to be applicable to most individuals as nut consumption reduced risk in both men and women, younger and older individuals, those who were overweight and those who had risk factors that increased their risk of developing heart disease.

### **Weight loss and weight maintenance**

Despite being high in fat and calorie dense, nut consumption does not appear to be associated with weight gain and consuming nuts twice or more per week (in the context of a healthy diet) is associated with decreased chance of weight gain. Because nuts are high in proteins and good fats, eating nuts may allow one to feel more satisfied and full for longer and lead to better food choices and less snacking. In the long term, this may contribute to maintaining or losing weight.

### **Other potential but less well studied benefits**

There is some evidence to suggest that a diet that is rich in nuts can: decrease the risk of diabetes (to date, this effect has been seen mostly in women), decrease the risks of some cancers and decrease the risk of developing gallbladder disease. However, more study is definitely needed in these areas. Also, Brazil nuts which are high in the mineral selenium are thought to support thyroid function.

Please remember nuts and nut-containing products should not be given to children under one year of age or those with allergies to nuts. However, as we have reviewed, nuts are a healthy addition to most diets and have shown benefits in obese individuals and in those with high blood cholesterol levels. Nuts are a rich food with rich benefits and making one small and positive change in one's diet has a way of leading to more positive changes and shifting one's balance toward improved health. Consider adding more nuts to your diet or if you are already eating nuts, keep it up! Your body will thank you with the gift of feeling and functioning better.

*Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. For more information, to leave suggestions for future articles and for additional resources as mentioned in the article visit [www.functionwellmedicine.com](http://www.functionwellmedicine.com)*

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