

Environmental Pollutants and Nutrition

Nuts and Seeds

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It's no secret that good nutrition can have a positive impact on health. A healthy, balanced diet that includes whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, and seeds can protect against chronic illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and certain cancers.



Eating plant foods such as nuts and seeds makes your diet more nutritious and may help prevent chronic diseases, especially if you come into contact with pollutants in the environment. Plant foods contain nutritious compounds called phytonutrients. Research into these plant compounds is relatively new. Unlike vitamins and minerals, there is no Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for phytonutrients.

A *nut* is defined as “a hard-shelled dry fruit or seed with a separable rind or shell and interior kernel.” A *seed* is defined as “the grain or ripened ovule of plants used for sowing.” Peanuts are actually a legume rather than a tree nut. Most commonly thought of as a snack or topping to a bagel or cracker, nuts and seeds can play a bigger part in the overall meal plan, and they offer the nutritional benefits to justify their inclusion.

Why are nuts and seeds considered a healthy part of my diet?

Nutritionally, nuts and seeds are low in saturated fat, yet high in fiber, vitamin E, magnesium, phytonutrients, and poly- and monounsaturated fats. Because they are of plant origin, nuts and seeds do not contain cholesterol. Unless salted, nuts and seeds are naturally low in sodium.

The University of Kentucky is a participant in the Superfund Research Program (SRP), which conducts ongoing research on the effects of pollutants and hazardous chemicals on the environment and on the body. Good nutrition is one of our best defenses for staying healthy, even in the presence of environmental pollutants. For more information, see *Hazardous Chemicals and Your Body* (IP-76 and IP-77) at <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/ip/ip76/ip76.pdf> and <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/ip/ip77/ip77.pdf>.



Vitamin E protects our immune system by acting as one of the body's most important antioxidants. Magnesium, a required mineral, is involved in many important bodily processes. Research has shown that not getting enough magnesium may lead to hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, and depression. Since many of the environmental pollutants can increase oxidative stress, adequate levels of vitamin E and magnesium, especially from eating whole foods, are important.

Don't nuts and seeds contain a lot of fat?

Although they yield the same amount of calories ounce for ounce, all fats are not created equal. Saturated and trans fats raise cholesterol levels. Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are healthier. Monounsaturated fats are being studied because they may help lower cholesterol. Polyunsaturated fats are essential to health and must be provided in small amounts in the foods we eat.

Most fats in nuts and seeds are monounsaturated and polyunsaturated. Research has found nuts and seeds to be good for heart health and protective against the damage caused by oxidative stress. Some nuts, however, contain more saturated fats than other nuts and should be consumed in smaller

amounts (e.g. Brazil nuts, macadamia nuts, and cashews). And, yes, calories do count! Limiting intake to one serving per day is advised. Including nuts and seeds as part of a healthy diet may help the body defend itself against the harmful effects of environmental pollutants. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Nutritional information for nuts and seeds.

| | Serving size | Calories | Fat (g) | Protein (g) | Fiber (g) | Saturated fatty acids (g) | MUFA* | PUFA** (g) |
|-----------------|-------------------------|----------|---------|-------------|-----------|---------------------------|-------|------------|
| Nuts | | | | | | | | |
| Almonds | 1 oz ≈ 20-23 whole nuts | 160 | 14 | 6 | 3.5 | | | |
| Hazelnuts | 1 oz ≈ 21 nuts | 180 | 17 | 4 | 2.7 | 1.3 | 12.9 | |
| Pecans | 1 oz ≈ 19 halves | 195 | 20 | 2.6 | 2.7 | 1.8 | 11.6 | 6.1 |
| Pine Nuts | 1 oz ≈ 167 kernels | 178 | 17.3 | 3.3 | 3.0 | 2.7 | 6.5 | 7.3 |
| Pistachios | 1 oz ≈ 49 nuts | 160 | 13 | 5.75 | 2.9 | 1.5 | 6.6 | 3.8 |
| Walnuts | 1 oz ≈ 14 halves | 185 | 18.5 | 4.3 | 1.9 | 1.7 | 2.5 | 13.4 |
| Brazil nuts | 1 oz ≈ 6-7 nuts | 185 | 18.8 | 4 | 2.1 | 4.3 | 7.0 | 5.8 |
| Cashews | 1 oz ≈ 16 nuts | 160 | 12.4 | 5.2 | 0.9 | 2.4 | 7.3 | 2.4 |
| Macadamia nuts | 1 oz ≈ 10-12 nuts (raw) | 205 | 21.5 | 2.2 | 2.4 | 3.4 | 16.7 | 0.4 |
| Seeds | | | | | | | | |
| Flaxseeds | 1 tbsp (raw) | 55 | 4.3 | 1.9 | 2.8 | | | |
| Pumpkin seeds | 1 oz | 160 | 13.9 | 8.6 | 1.7 | 2.3 | 3.7 | 5.4 |
| Sesame seeds | 1 tbsp | 50 | 4.5 | 1.6 | 1.1 | 2.6 | 6.8 | 7.2 |
| Sunflower seeds | 1 oz | 175 | 16.1 | 4.9 | 3.3 | | | |

* MUFA = Monounsaturated fats

** PUFA = Polyunsaturated fats

Note: Nutrient data were collected and analyzed using Nutrition Data System for Research software version 2009, developed by the Nutrition Coordinating Center (NCC), University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.

How many nuts and seeds should I eat?

According to the USDA MyPyramid (<http://www.mypyramid.gov>), a $\frac{1}{2}$ -ounce serving of nuts or seeds is equivalent to a 1-ounce serving of meat or poultry. This amount is equivalent to approximately 12 almonds, 24 pistachios, 7 walnut halves, or 1 level tablespoon of nut butter. Half an ounce of seeds or nuts is a good serving size for a snack. (Note: Nuts must be weighed on a food scale, not with a fluid-ounce cup measure.)

Health publications may recommend a 1.5-ounce serving of nuts for good overall health, but they do not suggest that you add additional calories to your current meal plan. Nuts and some seeds may be counted as the protein in a meal instead of meat, cheese, or eggs. If you choose to count nuts and seeds as the protein in your meal, a 1.5 ounce serving is equal to the recommended 3-ounce serving of meat, poultry, or fish. This substitution is in agreement with the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) recommendation of 1.5 ounces of nuts seeds per day as part of a heart-healthy diet.

What information is important when selecting and storing nuts and seeds?

To get the most out of your nuts and seeds, buy raw or plain products and store them properly (Table 2).

Raw vs. Roasted Nuts and Seeds

Raw, unroasted, unsalted nuts are the best choice for eating and cooking. Raw nuts and seeds have more nutrients because they are processed less. Unsalted nuts are naturally low in sodium. Raw nuts and seeds have a shorter shelf life, so they should be refrigerated or frozen for later use.

Commercial roasting of nuts and seeds is usually done in one of two ways: roasted or dry roasted. Roasting generally involves frying the nuts or seeds in oil and can add an additional 10 percent fat. Dry roasted nuts and seeds are heated without added oil but are often heavily salted. Raw unsalted nuts and seeds are healthier and often cost less.

Table 2. Selecting and storing nuts and seeds.

| Item | Selection | Storage |
|--------------|---|--|
| Nuts | | |
| All nuts | Avoid salted, oil-roasted nuts. Choose raw or plain varieties. If desired, roast at home in conventional oven. | Shelled nuts should be stored in an airtight container. Store up to 4 months in refrigerator or about 8 months in the freezer. |
| Seeds | | |
| Flaxseed | Flaxseeds should be ground before eating to get the most nutrients from the seeds. To extend shelf-life, buy whole seeds and grind them at home in a coffee grinder. You may want to use a separate coffee grinder for flaxseeds and spices instead of your coffee grinder to prevent flavor contamination. | Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator. Whole seeds last the longest; grind when needed for adding to baked goods. |
| Poppy | Poppy seeds are sold whole and can be ground for added versatility. The seeds are very hard and require a special grinder or mortar and pestle. Roasting enhances flavor. When using for pastries, soak in water for 1-3 hours prior to grinding. | Store in airtight container in the refrigerator. Whole seeds last longest; grind when needed for adding to baked goods. |
| Pumpkin | Choose unsalted varieties from the grocery. In autumn, seeds from fresh pumpkins can be roasted at home. | Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator. |
| Sesame | Buy from grocery and toast at home for a nutty addition to breads, spinach, noodle dishes, and vegetable stir-fries. | Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator to prevent seeds from becoming rancid. |



Serving suggestions

Add nuts and seeds to already familiar favorites.

- Chopped almonds, walnuts, or pecans to salads, breakfast cereal, or yogurt
- Cashews or peanuts to a stir fry recipe
- Pine nuts to pasta
- Ground walnuts to pancake batter
- Nuts or sunflower seeds to bread dough before baking
- Ground flaxseed in batters or breading for oven-baked fish or chicken
- Peanut or almond butters in stir fry recipes

Replace less nutritious choices with more healthful ones.

- Choose whole-grain crackers with added flaxseeds instead of less nutritious crackers.
- Replace salad croutons with nuts or seeds.

Nut and Seed Spread

- 1 cup walnut halves
- ½ cup sunflower kernels
- ½ cup sesame seeds
- 2 tsp honey
- 1 tsp oil
- 1 tsp water

Combine all nuts and seeds in a food processor or blender. Blend, gradually add honey, oil, and water until desired consistency. Store spread in refrigerator. Yield: approximately 1½ cups. One serving equals one level tablespoon.

Nutritional analysis performed with The Food Processor SQL, version 10.3.0, ESHA Research, 2008, Salem, OR.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1 Tablespoon (14g)
Servings Per Container 20

Amount Per Serving

Calories 90 **Calories from Fat** 70

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 8g 12%

Saturated Fat 1g 5%

Trans Fat 0g

Cholesterol 0mg 0%

Sodium 0mg 0%

Total Carbohydrate 2g 1%

Dietary Fiber 1g 4%

Sugars 1g

Protein 3g

Vitamin A 0% * Vitamin C 0%

Calcium 2% * Iron 4%

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 Calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

| | Calories | 2,000 | 2,500 |
|--------------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Total Fat | Less than | 65g | 80g |
| Saturated Fat | Less than | 20g | 25g |
| Cholesterol | Less than | 300mg | 300mg |
| Sodium | Less than | 2,400mg | 2,400mg |
| Total Carbohydrate | | 300g | 375g |
| Dietary Fiber | | 25g | 30g |

Calories per gram:
Fat 9 * Carbohydrate 4 * Protein 4

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