Nuts: Grab a Handful of Good Nutrition

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What food packs a powerhouse of health benefits in just a handful? Nuts! Recent research indicates that, eaten in moderation a few times a week, nuts are more than just another component of a nutritious, well-balanced diet. They also may help reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, and cancer.

Vitamins and minerals add to nuts’ heart-healthy, cancer-fighting properties. Potassium, magnesium, and calcium help control blood pressure. The high fiber content of nuts helps lower cholesterol and may protect against diseases like colon cancer. Although a higher-fat food, nuts contain mostly heart-healthy unsaturated fat and may help lower low-density lipoproteins (LDL) or “bad” cholesterol. Nuts are cholesterol-free and naturally contain, at most, just a trace of sodium.

How much, exactly, is a “handful?” Approximately one ounce equals a handful. The Food and Drug Administration suggests consuming up to 1.5 ounces of nuts daily or one and a half times a “handful” for health benefits. This is equivalent to approximately 1/3 cup.

Among the nutritious nuts are:

**Almonds** – In one ounce (about 20 to 24 shelled whole nuts), almonds have about half of the recommended daily amount of Vitamin E, a powerful cancer-fighting antioxidant. Vitamin E also may help promote healthy aging. Almonds also have more fiber than other nuts.

**Brazil nuts** – Brazil nuts provide a rich source of selenium, an essential trace mineral that may help prevent prostate, lung, colorectal, gastric, and skin cancers, as well as heart disease. One ounce of Brazil nuts (six to eight nuts) can have more than 500 micrograms (mcg) of selenium, enough to meet the Recommended Dietary Allowance for a week, while other nuts provide about one mcg.

**Peanuts** – Though often discussed with nuts, peanuts are a legume in the same family as beans, peas, and lentils. Peanuts are high in folate, a B vitamin that lowers blood levels of possibly harmful homocysteine. Low folate levels have been associated with colorectal, lung, esophageal, brain, cervical, and breast cancers as well as heart disease. An ounce of peanuts contains about ten percent of the recommended daily intake of folate. Peanuts also are an excellent source of niacin, providing about 20 percent of the daily value. Additionally, peanuts contain the antioxidant resveratrol.

**Walnuts** – Walnuts are high in a type of omega-3 fatty acid called alpha-linolenic acid. Omega-3 fatty acids, prevalent in fatty fish and leafy greens as well, may slow tumor growth and reduce cholesterol, triglycerides, and blood pressure. Walnuts also contain more antioxidants than any other nut. They have less vitamin E than almonds, but make up the difference with a variety of other antioxidant phytochemicals.

Nuts are filling, and snacking on a handful can curb hunger for a few hours. For the greatest benefit, eat a variety of nuts several times a week or even daily, but limit portions to one ounce (150-200 calories). Divide a container of nuts into small snack bags for easy snacking at home, office, or on the road. Sprinkle nuts into salads, yogurt, cereal, pasta, cooked vegetables, and muffins and pancakes (toss a handful or two into the batter).

For best quality, store shelled or unshelled nuts in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to six months or for a year in the freezer.

For added richness of flavor, try this fast recipe for microwave-toasted nuts. This method works well for amounts ranging from a tablespoon to one-half cup. With larger amounts, some are likely to turn dark more quickly than others. The time will vary depending on the size, type, and temperature of the nuts/seeds and also may be influenced by the type of microwave oven.

1. Spread from a tablespoon to one-half cup nuts evenly in a single layer in a flat, microwave-safe dish, such as a 9-inch microwave-safe pie plate.
2. Add a small amount of soft butter/margarine or oil to the nuts. Use approximately one-half teaspoon fat per one-half cup of nuts; use proportionately less for smaller amounts of nuts/seeds. Stir the nuts/seeds to thinly coat with the fat.

NOTE: This small amount of fat helps with browning, speeds up the toasting process and only adds about 20 calories per one-half cup of nuts.

3. Microwave on high for one minute.
4. Stir and microwave for another minute.
5. Check to see how the toasting is proceeding. Add more microwave cooking time one minute at a time because nuts and seeds can burn quickly. Stir after each addition of time.

Small amounts of thin nuts (for example, sliced almonds) could be finished at two minutes. Larger amounts of nuts, such as slivered or whole almonds, walnuts, or pecans, will take an additional one to two minutes of microwave cooking time to become lightly browned and smell fragrant.

6. Store any extra toasted nuts in an airtight container in the refrigerator for one to two weeks or freeze them in an airtight freezer container for one to three months.

Sources: *Food Reflections*, March 2004, Alice Henneman, MS, RD, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension-Lancaster County, [http://lancaster.unl.edu](http://lancaster.unl.edu)