

# Healthier Snacks for Kids: Nuts and Seeds by Dr. Claudia Anrig

With the growing concern of childhood obesity - rates have tripled in the last 30 years, and approximately 30 percent of all children are obese - it's past the time to educate parents on their child's snacking habits. Typically, children are reaching for high-calorie sodas, sports drinks, potato chips and microwave snacks when they need something light between meals. What they might be missing is something as simple as the health benefits of nuts and seeds.

Parents need to be educated that research continues to reveal that nuts and seeds do not deserve their bad reputation. Absolutely, they are high in fat; but it's the good fat, not the bad, and when eaten in moderation, their health benefits far outweigh the dangers of their fat content. The fact is, the more we learn about nuts and seeds, the more we realize that they're one of the best snack-food options for children.

## Isn't Fat Bad?

We know that nuts and seeds are high in fat. An ounce of almonds and sunflower seeds each have a total fat count of 14 grams; cashews have 13 grams and pecans have 20 grams apiece per ounce. It's when we consider what kind of fat they contain that we see the difference between these and other foods with a high total fat count.

Saturated fats raise our "bad" cholesterol levels (LDL) and increase our risk of heart disease and stroke. These are the fats that are high in most snack items and put our health at risk. By comparison, an ounce of almonds contains 1 gram of saturated fat, while cashews and pecans have 3 and 2 grams per ounce, respectively.

Where nuts and seeds are high in fat is in the mono- and polyunsaturated fats; however, these are good for us because they raise our "good" cholesterol levels (HDL) and typically contain essential vitamins like A, D, E and K. An ounce of almonds contains a combined 12 grams of mono- and polyunsaturated fats, cashews contain 10 combined grams and pecans have 18 combined grams.

## Nuts and Health: The Facts



In 1996, the [Iowa Women's Health Study](#) found that women who ate nuts four or more times a week were 40 percent less likely to die of heart disease. Since then, similar studies performed by the Harvard School of Public Health and Loma Linda University in California have found the same. [And the Physicians' Health Study \(2002\)](#) determined that men who consumed nuts two or more times per week had a noticeably reduced risk of sudden cardiac death.

**A study at the University of Toronto** found that nuts, almonds in particular, reduced risk factors that are typically associated with heart disease, specifically LDL count. **Richard Mattes, PhD, professor of foods and nutrition** at Purdue University in Indiana, found that when people added 1-2 ounces of nuts a day to their diets, they did not gain weight, contrary to popular belief.

Studies performed at **Brigham and Women's Hospital and the Harvard School of Public Health** revealed that three times as many people who were trying to lose weight were able to stick to a diet that included moderate fat content in the form of nuts and seeds. Researchers suggested that the fat, protein and fiber in nuts helped the dieter feel full longer, so many felt less deprived and ate less during the day.

Another study of women by the Harvard School of Public Health reported that there was a 30 percent reduced risk of type 2 diabetes in those women who ate five or more 1-ounce servings of nuts per week as compared with women who rarely or never ate nuts.

Finally, studies published in the *Journal of Nutrition* and elsewhere have found that seeds, flax seeds in particular, are high in omega-3 fatty acids, which have proven benefits in the fight against heart disease, stroke and other circulatory diseases.

### **The Good and the Bad**

When it comes to food in general, too much of a good thing can still end up being a bad thing; that's why moderation is key. But the options for eating good nuts and seeds are limitless, and the vitamins and minerals provided are equally various. A typical serving of nuts (1 ounce) generally will contain between 160 to 200 calories and 13 to 20 grams of fat, but it's monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats that make up the majority. When compared to potato chips, pastries and other typical "snack food" items with equal fat content, the difference lies in the nutritional value of the item as a whole. Most nuts and seeds are rich in fiber, phytonutrients and antioxidants such as vitamin E and selenium, as well as sterols and omega-3.

Despite the fact that it is not one, the peanut is still referred to as the world's most widely consumed nut. It is actually a legume and a relative to lentils and garbanzo beans, meaning it is a starch and not as nutritious as actual nuts. An additional concern is that it is a very common food allergen. Generally this is the one "nut" to avoid.

### **Comparing Nutritional Value**

Sunflower seeds provide the most potent combination of vitamins and minerals of any common nut or seed. A 1-ounce serving, which is about 2 tablespoons of seeds, contains more than 30 percent of the daily value of six vitamins and minerals, including vitamin E, phosphorous, selenium and manganese.

Pumpkin seeds are an equally healthful choice, with ¼-cup of kernels boasting more than twice the omega-3s of a 4-ounce serving of salmon. While the flax seed has long been recognized as a very popular health food, the chia seed is now being recognized for its merits. Both of these seeds are rich in essential fatty acids like omega-3 and omega-6.

Nuts are an excellent source of vitamins and minerals, with 1 ounce of Brazil nuts containing 780 percent of the recommended daily intake of selenium, and walnuts providing the most omega-3 fatty acids of any common nut. Almonds are a wonderful source of copper, magnesium and phosphorous, and provide 6 grams of protein per 1-ounce serving. The June 2004 issue of the *Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry* reported that pecans contain the highest antioxidant capacity of all nuts.

### **How to Snack Healthy**

Nuts and seeds are definitely one of nature's best snack foods and they can be enjoyed in a variety of ways. Of course, the best way is always going to be a small handful a day. Remember, the typical serving

of a nut or seed is 1 ounce or just enough to fill the palm of your hand. It's important to remind parents to not let their children snack right out of the bag, as they will typically not realize how many they've eaten until they've eaten too many.

A simple way of introducing nuts and seeds is having parents add it to their family's green salad. Sunflower seeds are commonly used, but slivered almonds are equally good. They can also be added to steamed vegetables or an entree.

Roasted nuts from a can are typically going to have additives that may counteract some of the good parents are doing by choosing a healthy snack. So, if they prefer their nuts and seeds roasted, encourage them to do it themselves. This can be done by spreading a single layer of nuts or seeds in a baking dish or sheet and then lightly coating them with olive oil. This will help the nuts or seeds brown while roasting. Then they should be put in the oven for about 5 to 10 minutes only. Since they do have a high fat content, they will continue to cook for a bit after being removed from the oven.

## Summary

The worst thing parents can do for themselves and their children is reach for junk foods when they need a snack. Nuts and seeds are a convenient, healthy snack food that takes the edge off hunger without the added carbohydrates and sugar of most other snack food options.

It should be noted that nuts are *not* a safe snack food for most children under the age of 5, as they may present a choking hazard. However, many grocery stores are beginning to stock almond, macadamia, pistachio, cashew and even sunflower seed butters, a healthy alternative to peanut butter.

Additionally, almond milk is now available as an excellent substitute for cow's milk. While cow's milk is high in saturated fat and a proven food allergen, almond milk is neither of these things. Typically sweetened using dates instead of sugar or sugar cane, almond milk is a healthier substitute than even soy milk.

## Selected Resources

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- "Nuts and Your Health." *Food Reflections* (online newsletter). University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension In Lancaster County. [lancaster.unl.edu/food/ftmar04.htm](http://lancaster.unl.edu/food/ftmar04.htm)
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