

# NUTS TO YOU!

GOOD FOR YOUR HEART,  
BUT WATCH YOUR WAISTLINE

BY DAVID SCHARDT

**S**eventh-day Adventists have a lower risk of heart disease. In 1992, researchers at Loma Linda University in California found one reason why.

Among the 31,000 Adventists studied, those who ate nuts more than four times a week were half as likely to die of a heart attack as those who ate nuts less than once a week.<sup>1</sup>

"Everybody was quite skeptical about whether we could generalize the findings to other population groups," explains Penny Kris-Etherton of Pennsylvania State University. Kris-Etherton serves on the American Heart Association's Nutrition Committee. Her research on nuts is funded in part by the walnut industry.

"People said that Seventh-day Adventists aren't like typical North Americans," Kris-Etherton recalls. "They don't drink, they don't smoke, they're mostly vegetarian, they have completely different lifestyles."

But four years later, "we were pleasantly surprised when the Iowa Women's Health Study found essentially the same benefit."

Women who ate nuts or seeds more than four times a week were 40 per cent less likely to die of coronary heart disease than similar women who didn't eat nuts.<sup>2</sup>

Other studies agreed. Among the 86,000 women in Harvard's Nurses' Health Study, those who ate at least 140 grams of nuts a week were 35 per cent less likely to be diagnosed with coronary heart disease than those who ate less than 30 grams of nuts a month.<sup>3</sup>

And in the Physicians' Health Study, men who ate nuts at least twice a week had half the rate of sudden cardiac death as men who rarely or never ate nuts.<sup>4</sup>

## Nuts for All

What's striking, says Kris-Etherton, is that the lower risk of heart disease in nut eaters seems to apply to every group that researchers have studied: male and female, black and white, and all adult age groups. "Even the oldest of the old, those over 80 years of age, benefit from nuts, although not quite to the same degree," she says.

However, the studies from Harvard and elsewhere looked at people who were already eating nuts on their own. So researchers couldn't tease out whether the nuts—or something else about the people who eat nuts—protect them against heart disease.

Solution: give people nuts to eat and wait to see what happens.



Peanuts are the most popular nuts (technically, they're legumes, not nuts). Thirty grams (28 peanuts) has 165 calories. A (level) two-tablespoon serving of peanut butter—whether creamy, chunky, or reduced-fat—has 190 calories.

Since 1993, two dozen studies have done that with peanuts, walnuts, almonds, macadamia nuts, pecans, pistachios, and hazelnuts.

"The studies have consistently shown that diets containing nuts, nut oils, or nut butters lower LDL ["bad"] cholesterol levels by about 0.25 to 0.40 millimoles per litre," says Kris-Etherton.

Why? Probably because nuts are high in polyunsaturated and monounsaturated

fats and contain naturally occurring cholesterol-lowering compounds called plant sterols, says Kris-Etherton.

In 2003, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved this "qualified" health claim for seven kinds of nuts: "Scientific evidence suggests but does not prove that eating 1.5 ounces [around 45 grams] per day of most nuts as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease."

While that claim would be illegal in Canada, the nut industry still manages to get its message across. Here's how a recent ad in *Canadian Living* magazine put it: "New research shows that eating about an ounce [around 30 grams] of almonds a day in place of foods higher in saturated fat can lower cholesterol...."

## Watch Your Waist

"Nuts are calorically dense and they're easy to overeat," says Kris-Etherton. Thirty grams of most nuts—around 20 almonds, 15 cashews, or 10 walnut halves, for example—deliver 170 to 180 calories (see "Go Nuts").

When the news broke that nuts might reduce the risk of heart disease, nutritionists worried about what would happen to an already chubby nation if people started scarfing down bags and cans of nuts to lower cholesterol.

Studies have shown that people consume more calories when offered foods or meals that are calorie-dense.<sup>5</sup>

But nut eaters aren't more likely to be overweight. "None of the population studies of people who include nuts in their diets show that they weigh more," says Kris-Etherton.

In fact, in studies of Seventh-day Adventists and 86,000 nurses, those who regularly ate nuts weighed less than those who didn't.<sup>1,3</sup>

But it's possible that nut eaters do other things that help keep them slim. So researchers have fed nuts to people and put them on the scale.

In research funded by the almond industry, scientists at Loma Linda University gave 81 middle-aged men and women 45 to 70 grams (about 320 calories' worth) of almonds to eat every day, but gave them no further instructions about whether to eat the nuts instead of—or in addition to—other foods.<sup>6</sup>

After six months, the women gained

an insignificant 0.2 pounds, but the men gained an average of 1.4 pounds.

If the men kept gaining weight, the researchers warned, "it would clearly become biologically significant, but only longer term studies can decide this question." The nut industry has yet to fund that research.

"I do worry a little bit about telling people that nuts are good and that they should eat them," says Kris-Etherton, "because some people will buy a big can

and not know that we're talking about 30 grams at a time, not half the can."

The best way to add nuts to your diet, she notes, is to eat them *instead* of other foods, especially ones that contain heart-damaging saturated fat.

"Have a peanut butter sandwich instead of a hamburger," she suggests. "Or season your vegetables with nuts instead of butter or margarine."

Thirty grams of salted nuts can range from 100 mg to 250 mg of sodium. If you

don't like unsalted nuts, which are essentially sodium-free, mix them half and half with salted nuts. You'll end up with just half the sodium. 🥜

<sup>1</sup> *Archives of Internal Medicine* 152: 1416, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> *New England Journal of Medicine* 334: 1156, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> *BMJ* 317: 1341, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> *Archives of Internal Medicine* 162: 1382, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 79: 962, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* 21: 275, 2002.

## GO NUTS

### Number of Nuts in 30 Grams



**ALMONDS**  
20-24



**MACADAMIAS**  
10-12

**BRAZIL NUTS**  
6-8



**CASHEWS**  
16-18



**HAZELNUTS**  
18-20



**PECANS**  
18-20  
halves



**PINE NUTS**  
150-157



**PISTACHIOS**  
45-47



**WALNUTS**  
8-11  
halves

In 2003, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved a heart disease claim for almonds, hazelnuts, peanuts, pecans, pignola pine nuts, pistachios, and walnuts. But the agency left out Brazil nuts, macadamias, cashews, and pinyon pine nuts because they contain 3 to 5 grams of saturated fat per 30 grams. (The nuts that were approved contain only 1 or 2 grams.)

The FDA also ignored sunflower, sesame, pumpkin, and other seeds. Even though they would probably have qualified for a

claim, no one petitioned the agency to okay one.

Are some nuts and seeds better than others? Walnuts and sunflower seeds have more polyunsaturated fat than the others, which may give them an extra cholesterol-lowering punch. But no one has pitted one nut against another, so it's not worth limiting yourself to one or two kinds of nuts (that you'll soon get tired of eating).

Source: Adapted from "Nutrition in Every Handful" ([www.nuthealth.org/inside.pdf](http://www.nuthealth.org/inside.pdf)), the International Tree Nut Council.