Editor's note: In recognition of the fact that regular consumption of health-promoting foods should form the foundation of every lifelong anti-aging strategy, beginning with this issue Life Extension will regularly spotlight “superfoods” that are among nature’s most abundant sources of beneficial nutrients.

Although almonds have been cultivated and enjoyed for thousands of years (even King Tut took some into the afterlife with him), in recent decades these delicious tree nuts have suffered in popularity, falling victim to overzealous diet gurus who declared all nuts to be prohibitively high in fat.

As it turns out, this misguided recommendation to banish nuts from one’s diet was both ill informed and counterproductive. While nuts are in fact calorie-dense foods, they are also nutritional powerhouses, packed with healthy fats, muscle-building protein, natural fiber, beneficial minerals such as copper and magnesium, and heart-healthy vitamins and antioxidants.¹²

Almonds are not only delicious, versatile, and portable, but are nutritionally beneficial on a number of levels.¹³ Recent studies have demonstrated that diets featuring almonds and other tree nuts do not cause weight gain and may actually promote weight loss.⁵⁻⁸ This can be explained by the exceptionally healthful fatty acid profile of nuts such as almonds. In concert with fiber, these compounds evidently work to suppress appetite, possibly by influencing the production of hormones involved in the hunger-satiety cycle and promoting a feeling of fullness. As a result, nut eaters may consume fewer calories from other food sources in the long run.⁵⁻⁸

And far from clogging arteries, compounds in almonds and other tree nuts work to reduce levels of harmful cholesterol.¹⁰⁻¹¹

More intriguing still, emerging research suggests that phytochemicals in almonds and other nuts may help prevent certain types of cancer.¹²⁻¹³ Increased nut consumption is associated with a reduced risk of developing gallstones in both men and postmenopausal women.¹⁴⁻¹⁵

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Super
FOODS

shown to regulate increases in blood glucose levels following meals, and to possibly prevent oxidative damage to proteins. These and other beneficial effects help explain why almonds are now widely perceived to be a heart-healthy food.

ALMONDS PROMOTE HEALTHY LIPID LEVELS

Almonds are rich in vitamin E and folate, as well as monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Although they contain no cholesterol, almonds nevertheless are an excellent source of phytosterols, or compounds that serve as plant analogs of human cholesterol. The important distinction, however, is that phytosterols actually serve to reduce levels of harmful cholesterol in humans who consume them, by decreasing the amount of cholesterol absorbed from other food sources through the gastrointestinal tract. Studies have documented marked increases in the ratio of beneficial high-density lipoprotein (HDL) to detrimental low-density lipoprotein (LDL) after supplementation with phytosterols.

In an important study, scientists examined the lipid-lowering effects of raw almonds, roasted salted almonds, and almond butter in men and women with high total cholesterol. The participants followed a heart-healthy diet containing 100 grams of one of three forms of almonds for one month. All three foods—raw almonds, roasted salted almonds, and almond butter—significantly reduced levels of LDL. Both raw and roasted almonds substantially lowered total cholesterol, while almond butter produced a modest reduction in total cholesterol. HDL levels rose in those consuming almond butter, but did not change in the groups consuming raw or roasted almonds. The scientists concluded that all forms of almonds—raw, roasted, or in roasted almond butter—can produce beneficial changes in blood lipid levels.

Almonds may play a role in normalizing a particularly dangerous blood lipid abnormality—the small, dense LDL particles that are strongly atherogenic and toxic to the delicate endothelial cells that line blood vessels. When adults with mildly elevated LDL levels consumed a diet incorporating almonds, soy protein, viscous fiber, and plant sterols for one month, they demonstrated notable reductions in LDL levels. Moreover, their levels of small, dense LDL declined, indicating that a diet containing almonds and other plant-derived nutrients can powerfully reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

CONCLUSION

Given all we now know about the health benefits of almonds and other tree nuts, incorporating these crunchy treats into one’s diet is a sound nutritional strategy. From regulating blood sugar and lowering cholesterol to preventing gallstones and heart disease, almonds deserve a place at everyone’s table, and can be enjoyed in moderation without a trace of guilt.
**NUTRITIONAL CONTENT OF ALMONDS**

Eating almonds raw by the handful is the easiest way to obtain all of their healthful benefits. Almonds supply a wealth of essential nutrients required for good health. A one-ounce serving of almonds (approximately 23 nuts) contains:

**Calories:** 163

- **Total fat:** 14 grams
  - **Saturated fat:** 1 gram
  - **Monounsaturated fat:** 9 grams
  - **Polyunsaturated fat:** 3.5 grams
  - **Trans fat:** 0 grams
- **Total carbohydrates:** 6 grams
  - **Dietary fiber:** 3 grams
  - **Sugars:** 1 gram
- **Protein:** 6 grams

**Vitamins and minerals:**
- **Vitamin A:** 1.4 IU
- **Lutein and zeaxanthin:** 0.3 mcg
- **Vitamin E:** 7.3 mg
- **Folate:** 8.2 mcg
- **Thiamine:** 0.1 mg
- **Riboflavin:** 0.2 mg
- **Niacin:** 1.1 mg
- **Calcium:** 70 mg
- **Magnesium:** 78 mg
- **Iron:** 1.2 mg
- **Phosphorus:** 134 mg
- **Sodium:** 0.3 mg
- **Potassium:** 206 mg
- **Zinc:** 0.9 mg
- **Copper:** 0.3 mg
- **Selenium:** 0.8 mcg

Almonds are a satisfying snack by themselves and make a delicious addition to foods such as salads, desserts, snack mixes, rice pilaf, yogurt, and poultry or fish entrees.

**REFERENCES**

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