Nut labels, ads, and Web sites promise to protect your heart, boost your energy levels, satisfy your hunger, build your muscles, nurture your bones and digestive health, and make you look good in a bikini. Many of those claims are a stretch.

Nuts (and seeds) are good foods. Most are rich in unsaturated fats, magnesium, and copper, with smaller amounts of protein, fiber, and iron. But they’re also high in calories. Here’s what to believe about nuts...and what claims to take with a grain of salt.

Information compiled by Melissa Pryputniewicz, with help from Amy Johnson.

YOU GOTTA HAVE HEART

Planters NUT-rition Heart Healthy Mix “may reduce the risk of heart disease,” says the can. Impressive.

But what's that tiny, scrunched, dark print on a dark background? “Scientific evidence suggests but does not prove that eating 1.5 ounces per day of most nuts, such as peanuts, almonds, pistachios, pecans, walnuts & hazelnuts (filberts), as part of a diet low in saturated fat & cholesterol & not resulting in increased caloric intake may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease....”

That’s the “qualified” health claim for nuts approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 2003. The feds decided that the evidence wasn’t strong enough to say that nuts prevent heart disease without the “qualified” part—“suggests but does not prove”—and that labels had to warn consumers not to let nuts boost their calorie intake. So most companies bury the full health claim where people won’t notice.

Here’s what we know about nuts and the heart.

1. Nut eaters. People who eat more nuts are less likely to die of a heart attack. But nut eaters are typically leaner, non-smokers, and more active. Researchers “adjust” for those factors, but can’t tell if something else about nut eaters keeps their hearts healthier. So it’s safer to rely on studies that feed people nuts to see what happens to their cholesterol.

2. Unsaturated fats. LDL (“bad”) cholesterol is 2 to 19 percent lower when people are fed almonds, peanuts, pecans, or walnuts than when they don’t eat those nuts. Most other nuts and seeds aren’t well studied, but odds are that pistachios, hazelnuts, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, and soy nuts also lower LDL, and that Brazil nuts, macadamias, and cashews don’t (so they’re not Best Bites). (See “The Nut Case,” p. 14.)

3. How much? In most studies, researchers gave people 1½ to 3½ servings of nuts a day (a serving is about ½ cup). In some studies, 1½ servings wasn’t enough to lower LDL significantly. Yet 3½ servings of most nuts pack a 600-calorie wallop. (Even 1½ servings means about 250 calories.)

4. Beyond fats. Nuts may lower damaging triglycerides, raise HDL (“good”) cholesterol, reduce inflammation, and relax artery linings. But so far, the evidence is preliminary.
ENERGY = CALORIES

“What were you thinking?” shouts the flight attendant when the passenger in the TV commercial accidentally opens the airplane door. “It was after 3 p.m. Your blood sugar was low,” explains the announcer. “Have some Emerald Nuts. They’ll keep you sharp.”

The evidence that nuts keep you alert? Zero.

Other brands—like Planters NUT-rition Energy Mix—claim to be a “natural source of energy.” Many people think that an “energy-rich” food makes you feel more energetic or stronger. In fact, when the word “energy” appears on food labels, it means “calories.” Yup. Nuts are a “natural” source of calories. No longer such a great selling point, huh?

DIGEST THIS

“The NUT CASE

THE NUT CASE

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Which nuts or seeds are good for your heart? All should lower your LDL (“bad”) cholesterol if you eat them instead of meat, butter, or other saturated fats. But only nuts that have at least twice as much polyunsaturated fat as saturated fat lower LDL if you eat them instead of pasta, bread, or other carbohydrates. That means pistachios, walnuts, pecans, almonds, peanuts, hazelnuts, soy nuts, sunflower seeds, and pumpkin seeds, but not macadamias, cashews, or Brazil nuts (so those three don’t get a Best Bite).

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Nutrient Database.

Shopping for Nuts

Here’s what to look for in the nut aisle:

- **Salt.** Salted nuts typically have 100 to 300 mg of sodium in every 1 oz. (¼-cup) serving. You can dodge it all if the label says “unsalted” or “raw.” “50% less salt” or “lightly salted” brands should satisfy a salt craving, but check the Nutrition Facts. A brand without a salt claim may have no more sodium than a lightly salted brand.

- **Dry-roasted or oil-roasted or raw?** It doesn’t matter. Roasted nuts (with or without oil) are no higher in saturated fat or calories.

- **Portion control.** If you’re unlikely to stop at ¾ cup (just 4 flat tablespoons), check out Blue Diamond Natural Almonds, which mark each ounce on the container’s “portion control window.” Or try Emerald’s or Blue Diamond’s 100-calorie packs (they contain ½ oz). Better yet, make your own: Toss some nuts into a resealable plastic bag.

- **Calories.** Nuts are calorie-dense and hard to resist. If you use them to garnish your salads, rice, or cereal, you may be less likely to overdo it.

- **Peanut butter.** It’s a question mark. In theory, peanut butter should have the same impact on cholesterol as peanuts (assuming it contains no partially hydrogenated oil). But (unlike nut eaters) peanut butter eaters have no lower risk of heart disease or obesity. And remember that a serving of peanut butter (190 calories) is only two flat tablespoons. It’s easy to eat more.

- **Extras.** In Nature Valley Granola Nut Clusters, the nuts are dwarfed by oats, sugar, rice flour, and oil. Planters Chocolate Lovers and Mauna Loa Chocolate Macadamias end up with 7 grams of saturated fat and 230 calories per serving (about 10 pieces). Stick with straight nuts.
