The Folklore: Almonds have played a prominent role in cultures and customs around the world for centuries, particularly as a sign of fertility. Italians shower newlyweds with almonds, and guests at Greek weddings receive a small bundle of candy-coated almonds tied in ribbons at the close of the reception. In India, pregnant women are urged to eat almonds every day.

The Facts: Though a tree nut, almonds are actually the kernel of a fuzzy gray-green fruit and are related to stone fruits such as nectarines and peaches. Almonds provide more protein, fiber, vitamin E, riboflavin and calcium than any other nut. A one-ounce handful (23 whole almonds—160 calories) provides one-third of the Daily Value of vitamin E and is an excellent source of magnesium. Almonds are a good source of protein, fiber, riboflavin and copper and also contain calcium, zinc and potassium.

The Findings: According to a University of Toronto Study, volunteers who ate a small handful of almonds each day for a month experienced a 4.4% drop in their LDL’s (low-density lipoproteins, so-called “bad” cholesterol). In another study of 65 overweight and obese volunteers, most with type 2 diabetes, those who ate a moderate-fat diet (39% of calories) containing three ounces of almonds lost more weight than those on a low-fat diet (18% of calories) that contained no almonds. Both groups ate the same number of calories for six months. Almond eaters also saw an 11% drop in their systolic blood pressure compared to no change in blood pressure among the non-almond eaters.

The Finer Points: Raw almonds are delicious, but roasting them brings out their satisfying crunch, golden brown color and nutty flavor. Ground almonds can be used as a nutritious coating for fish, poultry or lean pork, either alone or with added dried herbs, seasonings or as part of a bread crumb mixture. Almonds, along with all nuts, are a concentrated source of fat and calories. Simply adding them to your current diet may result in unwanted weight gain. Ideally, substitute them for less nutritious snacks such as chips, crackers and cookies. An empty 2- by 3-inch mint tin (think Almonds) is ideal for holding an ounce of nuts (23 whole almonds) to snack on throughout the day. It fits easily into a purse or pocket and keeps your daily portion in check.

—Anastasia Schepers, M.S., R.D.

Thai Cabbage Salad
3 cups sliced red cabbage
3 cups sliced green cabbage
1 cup grated carrots
¼ cup thinly sliced green onions, thoroughly washed
½ cup toasted and chopped whole almonds

In a large mixing bowl, toss together all ingredients, except dressing (see recipe below).

Citrus Dressing: ½ cup canola or vegetable oil, ¼ cup fresh lime juice, 2 teaspoons sugar, 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh cilantro, 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh mint, ½ teaspoon salt.

Combine all ingredients in mixing bowl. Whisk until blended. Toss salad with dressing.

Makes 10 servings.

Nutrition Analysis per Serving: 117 calories, 2 grams protein, 10 grams fat, 6 grams carbohydrate, 2 grams fiber, 58 milligrams sodium.

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In Brief

Lutein, a natural antioxidant phytoneutrific found in spinach, kale and other green leafy vegetables, may moderate symptoms of age-related macular degeneration (ARMD), a leading cause of blindness in older Americans, suggests research from the Lutein Antioxidant Supplementation Trial (LAST). In the study, 90 adults (mostly men) with ARMD took daily doses of lutein supplements (10 milligrams); lutein with additional antioxidants and nutrients (OcuPower); or a placebo. After 12 months, only those taking lutein showed significant improvements in visual function; the lutein combination treatment produced slightly greater effect. No benefits were seen in those taking the placebo.

The researchers suggest that lutein supplements may be effective at all stages of ARMD.

Optometry, April 2004.

You Should Know

Common Food Additive May Trigger Runny Nose

Your chronic stuffy nose could be the result of something else besides a high pollen count, according to Italian researchers reporting in the journal Allergy.

In the first well-controlled study of its kind, researchers found that the common food additive monosodium benzoate triggered rhinitis (runny, stuffy nose, sneezing and nasal itching) in a group of 20 adults who did not have allergies. Their symptoms either improved or disappeared completely while following an additive-free diet. All 20 experienced symptoms anew when the additive was reintroduced. Monosodium benzoate is a preservative commonly found in fruit juice, fruit drinks, pie fillings, pickles, olives and salad dressings.

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