pick a nut, any nut

Functional foods are all the rage in nutritional labs, but some of the best are made by nature—nuts. Full of macronutrients, such as protein and healthful plant fats, as well as antioxidants, vitamins and minerals, nuts are a heart-smart snack or addition to any meal. In fact, eating up to a cup of nuts (50–100g) daily five times a week may cut your cholesterol, reported South African researchers in the September 2005 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition.* (The nuts were eaten as part of a diet made up of approximately 35 percent fat, most of which was mono- and polyunsaturated, not cholesterol-raising saturated fat.) Here, we examine a few nutty choices to keep within reach.

By Heidi Hoff
walnuts

Walnuts are everything they're cracked up to be and more, says Carol Berg Sloan, RD, nutrition consultant for the California Walnut Commission. "Walnuts are the only tree nut rich in alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), an essential omega-3 fatty acid." Fourteen walnut halves provide an impressive 2.5g of ALA, almost double the recommended daily allowance (RDA). If you're looking for fresh walnuts, autumn in California is the place to be. But whether fresh picked or store bought, storage is the key to preserving walnuts' bountiful benefits. Keep them in an airtight container in your freezer, and they'll last for up to a year; just keep them away from strong-smelling foods to avoid odor absorption.

almonds

Wouldn't it be great if we could pop an almond instead of a pill to diffuse high cholesterol? In 2002, Canadian researchers found that eating a handful of almonds per day lowered LDL, or "bad" cholesterol, an average of 4.4 percent. Their results appeared in the journal Circulation. As with walnuts, California is the mother lode—all of the almonds sold commercially in the United States are from the state's Central Valley. Almonds will last two years in the refrigerator or freezer.

There's nothing you can do to change the day you were born. But simply choosing the right foods and the right kitchen appliance can change the way you feel on your next birthday...and the next...and the next.

Research proves that it's actually "oxidative stress" rather than years that results in poor vision, brittle bones and a weakened immune system. That's good news, because foods rich in vitamins C and E and beta-carotene have the antioxidants needed to neutralize the negative effects of oxidation.

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pistachios
When it comes to buying pistachios, don’t fixate on whether they’re natural or pink. “The vegetable-based dye is purely decorative and only applied to the shells upon retailer request,” says Donna Gavello, of the California Pistachio Commission. Color aside, pistachios are well worth the trouble of shelling to get to the nutritious nut inside. A shelled 1-oz serving (47 nuts) yields as much potassium (295mg) as half a large banana. Pistachios contain mainly heart-healthy unsaturated fat plus protein and a host of vitamins and minerals such as B₆ and magnesium. They may also contain more cholesterol-lowering phytosterols than the average nut—279mg per 100g—according to an analysis in the November 2005 issue of the Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry. These flavorful nuts thrive in areas with long, hot summers and cool winters, such as, yes, California’s Central Valley. They’ll stay fresh in an airtight container for up to six months in the refrigerator or one year in the freezer. Setting a bowl of pistachios out at your next party is a good idea, but don’t leave them out afterward; they’ll be soggy in a day or two.

pecans
Hear the word pecans and images of decadent delights may dance in your head—pecan pie, anyone? But this yummy Southern nut is a heart-healthy snack, according to a study published in the September 2001 issue of the Journal of Nutrition. Researchers at Loma Linda University in California found that a pecan-enriched diet decreased total and LDL (“bad”) cholesterol levels by 6.7 percent and 10.4 percent respectfully, while increasing HDL (“good”) cholesterol. Since pecans are rich in monounsaturated fat, the researchers recommended them as part of a prescribed cholesterol-lowering diet. When shopping, choose shelled pecans that have warm golden color; dark brown coloration indicates rancid nuts. You can keep shelled pecans in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to nine months or in airtight bags in the freezer for up to two years.

The synergistic benefits of adding nuts to any meal are endless. Add them to salads, granola, oatmeal, desserts or entrees; all you need are a few since nuts are loaded with calories. The extra nutrients, cholesterol-lowering benefits and irresistible flavor and crunch make going nuts not such a bad thing.

EAT SMART

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