The Beat Goes On: New Research Continues to Show Almonds’ Valuable Role in Heart Health

Looking Beyond Cholesterol

Almond consumption is associated with a lower risk of heart disease, and almonds’ effect on cholesterol is only a partial explanation. Three other new studies provide insight on other likely factors. Almonds may lower the amount of insulin the body releases. High blood sugar and insulin levels can raise the risk of heart disease by causing damage to blood vessel walls. Previous research has indicated that almonds may be able to decrease blood sugar levels after a meal. A new longer-term study from researchers at the University of Toronto looked further at this phenomenon. Subjects who ate a daily snack of almonds – approximately 37 gm or 73 gm – did not have to produce as much insulin as subjects who did not eat almonds. (A typical recommended serving of almonds is 28 gm).

The antioxidants in almonds may play a role in reducing oxidative damage. Oxidized LDL cholesterol is known to increase the risk of heart disease. However, studies suggest antioxidants from foods, such as almonds, may help prevent LDL oxidation. Almonds contain levels of antioxidants (vitamin E and phenolics) in amounts similar to certain fruits and vegetables, and a previous study has shown the antioxidants in almonds can reduce LDL oxidation. New research continues to support this finding. Using the same subjects from the insulin study and the same amount of almonds, researchers found that subjects eating a daily almond snack had reduced markers of oxidative damage.

The fat in almonds is released slowly. A rise in blood fat levels, or triglycerides, after a meal poses a risk for heart disease; however, slow release and digestion of fats from foods may reduce triglycerides. Researchers at King’s College, London, in the UK have been looking at how fat is released from almonds and, most recently, how eating different forms of almonds affects changes in blood triglyceride levels. The study found that eating a meal containing whole almonds reduced triglyceride levels significantly as compared to a meal without them, suggesting the structure of almonds releases fat slowly and therefore causes a lower rise in triglyceride levels.

Looking Beyond Heart Health: Almonds’ Potential as a Prebiotic

Research is increasingly showing the importance of maintaining a healthy gut, and including foods with prebiotics and probiotics is proving to be one way this can be achieved. Prebiotics are found naturally in or added to foods and deliver good bacteria to the gut. Prebiotics, on the other hand, are non-digestible parts of plant foods. But the occurrence of good bacteria in the gut, including those delivered by prebiotics, helps the body digest these compounds. When they do, other healthful substances are released that may help to contribute to a stronger immune system and an overall healthier gut.

Researchers at the Institute of Food Research in Norwich tested the prebiotic effects of several different forms of almonds (finely ground, defatted ground, and raw and blanched almond skins). All forms except the defatted ground almonds showed prebiotic effects. When compared to fructo-oligosaccharide, a prebiotic found in certain fruits and vegetables, the prebiotic effects of almonds were comparable.

Together, the studies being presented at Experimental Biology demonstrate the many health benefits of almonds. So, whether looking to lower cholesterol, improve heart health, or improve gut health, eating a daily handful of almonds is a healthy habit to develop. A recommended serving of almonds (about a handful or 23 almonds) is an excellent source of vitamin E and magnesium and offers protein, fiber, heart-healthy monounsaturated fat, potassium, calcium, phosphorus, and iron. Not only are almonds a simple choice with a positive impact on health – they also add great taste and crunch to any meal or snack.

For additional information about almonds, including easy recipes and snack ideas, visit http://www.AlmondsAreIn.com.