Walnuts: Crack Open Daily for Your Health

The Folklore. Ancient Romans regarded walnuts as food for the gods. In Medieval times, the tree nut was said to ease digestion. And in the 16th and 17th centuries, people used walnuts to treat head ailments, boost intellect and induce calm.

The Facts. The black walnut (Juglans nigra) is native to North America, but the English walnut (Juglans regia) dominates the marketplace. The so-called English walnut actually hails from Persia; “English” refers to the mariners who transported walnuts around the world for trade.

Walnuts are the only nut that supply significant amounts of alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), an omega-3 fatty acid credited with several health benefits. One ounce of walnuts more than satisfies the suggested daily intake of ALA. Walnuts also deliver the minerals copper, phosphorus, magnesium and manganese.

The Findings. Research suggests that eating walnuts can calm inflammation of blood vessels and lower blood cholesterol levels. A recent European study of nearly 400 people at risk for heart disease found that eating an ounce of nuts (half as walnuts) daily as part of a traditional Mediterranean diet reduced oxidation of low-density lipoproteins (“bad” LDL cholesterol) over three months. Oxidized-LDL (ox-LDL) is the “really bad” cholesterol implicated in heart disease.

Recently, Penn State researchers discovered that a diet rich in ALA from walnuts and walnut oil bolsters bone density. While the study examined only ALA’s effects, there’s a good chance the minerals in walnuts benefit bone health too.

What about walnuts and your waistline? Like all nuts, walnuts are rich in fat, but mostly the beneficial unsaturated kind. As long as you keep calories in balance with exercise, walnuts won’t add inches, according to a scientific review. Moreover, the famed Nurses’ Health Study found that women who ate at least five ounces of nuts a week were less likely to develop type 2 diabetes during 16 years of follow-up. The bottom line? A small handful a day is likely good for your health.

The Finer Points. When buying nuts in the shell, pick intact shells that are heavy for their size. For freshness, buy them packaged, not from bins. Store in a cool, dark, dry place; they’ll keep six months.

Walnuts are tasty on their own, but they also pair well with other healthful foods: Sprinkle chopped walnuts onto cereal, sautéed vegetables and salads; stir into low-fat yogurt, quick bread batters, pilafs, whole-grain couscous and chicken salad. Intensify their flavor by roasting shelled nuts on a baking sheet at 170°F for 15 to 20 minutes. Make a banana-walnut smoothie by blending a medium-ripe frozen banana with one cup low-fat vanilla yogurt and 1/4 cup walnuts.

—Elizabeth M. Ward, M.S., R.D.

Notable Nutrients
1 ounce (14 halves or 1/4 cup shelled pieces)

Calories: 185
Fiber: 2 grams (6% DV)
Copper: 45 micrograms (23% DV)
Magnesium: 45 milligrams (11% DV)
Manganese: 1 milligram (49% DV)
Phosphorus: 98 milligrams (10% DV)
Alpha-linolenic acid: 2.6 grams (163% DV for men; 235% DV for women)

DV=Daily Value; AI= Adequate Intake

EN’s Own Walnut-Crusted Chicken

1/2 cup chopped walnuts
1/4 cup flavored bread crumbs
4 skinless, boneless chicken breasts (1 lb.)
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
1 tablespoon olive oil

1. Heat oven to 400°F.
2. Using a mini-food processor or blender, grind the walnuts into fine crumbs.
3. Transfer nut crumbs to a shallow bowl. Stir in breadcrumbs, mixing thoroughly.
4. Rub each breast with mustard, then coat with walnut-breadcrumb mixture.
5. Coat baking sheet with olive oil and place in hot oven for five minutes.
6. Place chicken on hot sheet; bake at 400°F for 7 to 10 minutes on each side.

Serves four.

Nutrition Information Per Serving: 284 calories, 30 grams protein, 8 grams carbohydrates, 15 grams fat, 30 micrograms copper, 62 milligrams magnesium, 0.6 milligrams manganese, 292 milligrams phosphorus, 2 grams fiber, 291 milligrams sodium.

Research Roundup

• Eating berries daily can benefit your heart in three ways. Finnish researchers added berries twice a day to the diets of 72 middle-aged men and women with cardiovascular risk factors. After eight weeks, tests showed lower blood pressure, higher density lipoproteins (HDLS, the “good” cholesterol) and less platelet aggregation, potentially preventing blood clots. Berries are rich in naturally occurring polyphenols, which the researchers credit for the beneficial effects.


• Trans fats may increase the risk of prostate cancer. That’s what Harvard researchers with the Physicians’ Health Study found when they analyzed blood levels of trans fatty acids in almost 15,000 healthy men, 500 of whom developed prostate cancer during 13 years of follow-up. Those with high blood levels of trans were more than twice as likely to develop a nonaggressive form of the cancer as those with the lowest levels. There was no link to aggressive forms of prostate cancer.

Cancer Epidemiology Biomarkers and Prevention, January 2008.

• Regularly getting little sleep may be detrimental to your weight. Older adults who sleep five hours a night or less are about 30% more likely to be obese than those who sleep seven hours a night on average. Researchers in Spain followed more than 3,500 men and women 60-plus years old for two years. The effect of five hours or less of sleep seemed strongest among women short sleepers, who were three times more likely to gain at least 11 pounds during the study. Previous research led the experts to speculate that short sleepers may have lower concentrations of the hormone leptin, which helps control appetite.


In Coming Issues

• 7 Reasons to Get More C. Don’t short-shrift yourself on this vitamin.

• Vegetarian Secrets for Meat Eaters. Healthy habits for everyone based on the latest international research.

• Hope and Help When Eating Out. Tips on choosing menu items.

• Breakfast/ Snack Bars. EN’s faves.

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