

A Nutty Idea!
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My folks were born and raised in pecan country – not of the “puh-kahn” pie variety, but rather “pea-can” pie variety (don’t forget to stretch out each syllable for about 3 counts.)

Dad would sit for hours in front of the Sunday football games cracking and hulling pecans that we had hauled up from one of our many trips down to Pawnee, Oklahoma. They were readily handy in our home to snack on, cook with, and garnish with. Only age and education have taught me the nutritional value of this snacking habit.

Tree nuts (almonds, walnuts, pecans, pistachio’s, and cashews to name a few) have not always been viewed as a healthy protein source. Part of the cause for the incorrect view comes from their relatively high fat and calorie content. However, it is the type of fat they contain that makes them a great protein alternative to meat protein. Unlike the saturated fat found in most meat protein, the poly- and monounsaturated fat found in tree nuts are known as “good fats”. These types of fats aid the body’s absorption of Vitamins A, D, E, and K. Tree nuts are also high in calories, but they offer an excellent protein-rich source of energy and nutrients – making the trade-off a healthy choice.

In fact, in a recent Harvard University long-running study, researchers identified that people who eat nuts every day lived healthier lives than those who did not. (Dr. Frank Hu, professor of nutrition and epidemiology with Harvard School of Public Health.)

An important thing to remember when incorporating tree nuts into your diet choices is to control the portion size. This affords you the nutrient benefits while minimizing the calorie intake. The Choose MyPlate program developed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) identifies that 1/2 ounce nuts or seeds is the equivalent of an ounce of protein foods. MyPlate recommends that you *“choose unsalted nuts or seeds as a snack, on salads, or in main dishes to*

replace meat or poultry. Nuts and seeds are a concentrated source of calories, so eat small portions to keep calories in check."

Use the following information to help you control portion size with tree nuts.

The list indicates the number of nuts equivalent to a one ounce portion of each*:

- Almonds (20-24)
- Brazil Nuts (6-8)
- Cashews (16-18)
- Hazelnuts (18-20)
- Macadamias (10-12)
- Pecans (18-20)
- Pine Nuts (150-157)
- Pistachios (47-49)
- Walnuts (8-14)

** Source: University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension, "Nuts for Nutrition" information bulletin*

Although nuts are a great nutrient-rich food, they are a significant concern for those who have nut allergies. Symptoms of an allergic reaction commonly include hives, itchy eyes, difficulty breathing, sneezing, swelling, stomach cramps, diarrhea, and vomiting. In severe cases, allergic reactions can be life-threatening. Many nut allergies are discovered during early childhood. Tree nut allergies are among the most common food allergies for both teens and adults. Peanut allergies are another common food allergy keeping in mind that peanuts are not classified as tree nuts. Due to the increasing rise of nut allergies, products containing nuts or produced where exposure to nuts could occur must be clearly labeled.

In addition to being a rich protein source, they are a good source of dietary fiber. The health benefit of a diet that is high in fiber is well documented. Certain types of fiber have been found to reduce blood cholesterol levels. Low blood cholesterol (below 200mg/dl) has been associated with a reduced risk of coronary heart disease. Additionally, high fiber diets help prevent and treat constipation, hemorrhoids, and diverticulitis.

What are some easy ways to add nuts to your diet? Here are some ideas:**

- Sprinkle them over cereal or yogurt for breakfast
- Mix nuts with popcorn or trail mix to make a great to-go snack
- Add sliced or chopped nuts to any salad for flavor and crunch
- Use them and seasonings to coat meat, poultry, or fish before baking
- Accent any stir-fry with toasted nuts to develop a tastier combination
- Use them in desserts such as brownies and cookies for an added crunch

***Source: Penn State Extension: "Eat Nuts for Good Health"*

Here's a tasty granola recipe that adds both texture and flavor to yogurt, a crisp bed of salad greens, or stand as a quick snack alone:

Anytime Walnut Granola

- 3 c. rolled oats
- ½ c. whole-bran cereal
- ¾ c. chopped walnuts
- 3 tablespoons oil
- 1/3 c. honey
- ½ c. raisins

In a medium bowl, mix well all ingredients except raisins. Spread in a jelly-roll pan or large baking pan. Bake in preheated 325°F oven, stirring twice, 20-25 minutes or until golden brown. Remove from oven and stir in raisins. Cool in pan on rack. Refrigerate in airtight containers up to 2 weeks; freeze for longer storage. Serves 4. Each ½ c. serving = 256 calories, 6 g protein, 44 g carbohydrate, and 11 g fat

The next time you want to grab a quick snack to satisfy your appetite between meals, consider grabbing a handful of unsalted nuts. Their easy accessibility coupled with the crunchy texture is a quick and healthy way to satisfy your hunger. Whether you say “pea-can” or “puh-kahn”, this power packed nut is one of many options for a great addition to your snacking choices or as an excellent alternative to more traditional sources of protein.

For more information about healthy food choices and the Choose MyPlate program, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!