

Editorial

Health Package - Eat Nuts, Live Longer?

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Editor

If you like nuts — and it doesn't seem to matter what kind is your personal favourite — you might be cutting your risk of early death by eating a handful of them every day.

New research found that people who ate a 1-ounce serving of nuts each day showed a 20 percent reduced risk of dying from any cause over three decades, compared to those who didn't eat the tasty snacks. "We looked at nut consumption in approximately 119,000 Americans over the past 30 years," said study senior author Dr. Charles Fuchs, director of the Gastrointestinal Cancer Centre at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. "People who were regular nut consumers had a significant reduction in [death from all causes]."

"This is an observational study, so it's not absolute in terms of proof," Fuchs said. "But prior studies suggest health benefits like a lower risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes, and lower cholesterol, among other health outcomes." The study was funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health and the International Tree Nut Council Nutrition Research and Education Foundation, a non-profit institute that represents nine different nut industries.

The findings were published in the issue of the New England Journal of Medicine. Nuts are nutrient-dense foods, according to background information included in the study. They contain unsaturated fatty acids, fibre, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. Previous research has linked nut consumption to a lower risk of heart disease, as well as improvements in risk factors for heart disease such as high cholesterol, according to the study. The researchers looked at how nut consumption might affect all causes of death, as well as whether nuts were linked to death risk from specific conditions, such as heart disease.

The study included more than 76,000 women from the Nurses' Health Study and more than 42,000 men from the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study.

Anyone with a history of heart disease, stroke or cancer was excluded from the study. Nut consumption was verified at the start of the study, and then every two to four years during the study. During about 30 years of

follow-up, more than 16,000 women and more than 11,000 men died. When the researchers compared people who ate nuts to people who never ate nuts, they found a 7 percent reduced risk of dying from any cause during the 30-year study. People who consumed more nuts had an even lower risk of dying. Those who had nuts once a week had an 11 percent lower risk of death, while people who had two to four servings of nuts a week saw their risk drop by 13 percent. Those who consumed the most nuts — at least seven 1-ounce servings weekly — reduced their overall death risk by 20 percent, according to the study.

Eating more nuts also was linked to a lower risk of death due to cancer, heart disease and respiratory disease. The study uncovered an association between eating nuts and living longer, but it didn't prove cause-and-effect. Fuchs said a 1-ounce serving was equal to about 16 to 24 almonds, 16 to 18 cashews or 30 to 35 peanuts. People who ate nuts tended to be healthier overall, according to the study. They were leaner, had lower rates of obesity, had lower cholesterol, had less high blood sugar, had smaller waist circumferences, ate more fruits and vegetables, and exercised more than people who ate fewer or no nuts.

Fuchs and his team controlled the data to account for these factors. One expert said what people who are eating nuts aren't eating instead is also important. "This study adds to the research that nuts are part of an overall healthful diet, especially if people are choosing to have nuts instead of chips or candy," said Alice Bender, associate director for the American Institute for Cancer Research. "Nuts provide quality protein, fiber, good fats {and} B vitamins," she said. "Nuts are a whole package of health, and they have shown some cancer-protective qualities." "But nuts are not a magic bullet," she said. They are just one part of all the wonderful foods we have. It is important to eat foods that are minimally processed."

"The best thing to do is to substitute nuts for other foods that may be crunchy or sweet," Bender said. "Replace some of those foods that do not contribute much to our diets with nuts. You will be replacing empty calories with a whole food."