

HEARTHEALTH

PEANUTPOWER

By D. Milton Stokes, R.D.

Imagine finding a healthy snack at a baseball game. It's possible—if you grab a bag of peanuts.

In a study published in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, researchers from Purdue University added to the evidence that regular peanut consumption may help reduce cardiovascular-disease risk. All it takes is an ounce and a half—a handful—of shelled peanuts a day.

“Nuts are a nutrient-dense food,” explains Marilyn K. Tanner, R.D., a St. Louis-based spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. Technically a legume, the nutritional profile of peanuts makes them a health superstar: full of unsaturated (“good”) fat, magnesium, vitamin E and folate.

Fat has received a bad rap, but all fats are not the same. Saturated fat—found in meat and dairy products—increases low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, which “is related to the risk of developing cardiovascular disease,” explains Alice H. Lichtenstein, D.Sc., professor of nutrition, science and policy at Tufts University in Boston and a spokesperson for the American Heart Association. Replacing saturated fat with unsaturated fat results in lower total and LDL cholesterol levels. That’s where vegetable oils come in, including those from peanuts and nuts—they provide healthy unsaturated fat. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently approved a new qualified health claim for some nuts due to a moderate amount of scientific evidence. Those nuts—almonds, hazelnuts, peanuts, pecans, pistachios and walnuts—when consumed as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce cardiovascular-disease risk. Brazil nuts, cashews and macadamias, however, contain too much saturated fat (more than two grams per serving) to include them in this claim.

Apart from helping to achieve better cholesterol profiles, the fat from nuts and other vegetable oils—like all fat—delays the rate that the stomach empties, extending the feeling of satiety or being full, explains Lichtenstein. This may help people eat less.

The Peanut, Unshelled

Here's what you get in 1.5 ounces of dry-roasted peanuts:

Calories: 249

Protein: 10.5 grams

Fat: 21 total grams

Saturated fat: 3 grams

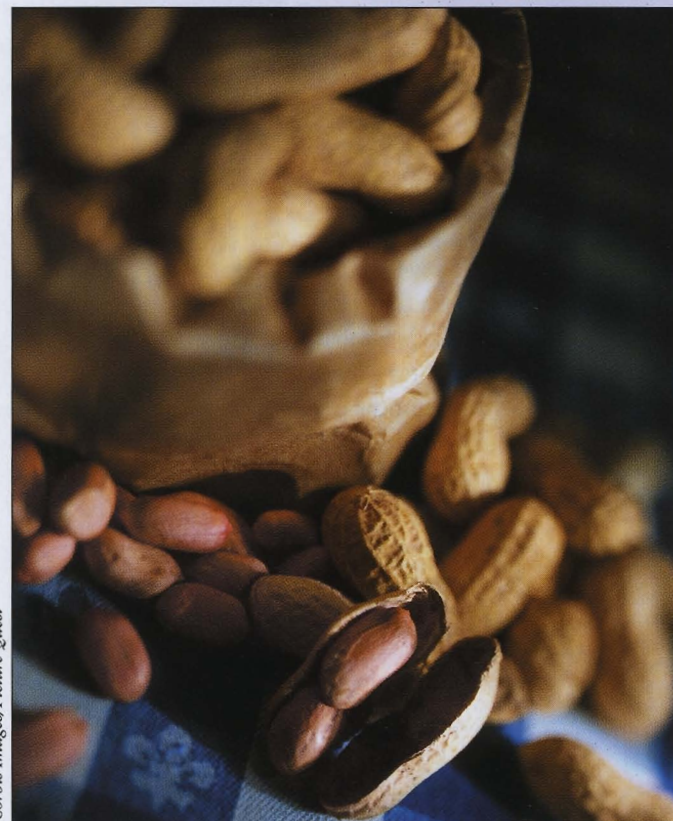
Magnesium: 18% Daily Value

Vitamin E: 11% DV

Folate: 15% DV

But wait, there's more!

Peanuts are also rich in vitamins and minerals. One such is magnesium, which is necessary for proper muscle function, including the heart muscle. Studies also indicate



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that magnesium may lower blood pressure, a risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

While nuts contain ample vitamin E, an antioxidant, it seems recent science no longer supports this nutrient's connection with heart health. “Four or five good studies,” says Lichtenstein, “show no effect.” However, vitamin E is difficult to obtain in the diet and has other health benefits.

Folate, a B vitamin also found in peanuts, reduces homocysteine in the blood. Studies link homocysteine with promoting a buildup of plaque, which could lead to blocked arteries.

These good things come with a drawback: peanuts are loaded with calories, so don't make them the center of your diet. (That means no making a lunch out of peanuts and chocolate bars!) Focus on eating a wide variety of foods, and try sprinkling some nuts on a salad. Whether you're in it for health or taste, a handful of peanuts can make the ticker smile. ■

D. Milton Stokes, R.D., practices clinical nutrition and covers men's health and nutrition in a weekly column for SlimFast.com. He has contributed to Today's Dietitian, Family Doctor, the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, The Guide to World Nutrition and Health, and WeightWatchers.com.