

Nuts and heart health



This position statement summarises the key findings and recommendations from the Heart Foundation's 'Nuts and Heart Health Evidence Paper'.

KEY FINDINGS

Frequent nut consumption appears to play a protective role in prevention of cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease, myocardial infarction, and sudden death. Clinical studies suggest this is largely due to reductions in total cholesterol, LDL-cholesterol, and apolipoprotein B concentrations. The cholesterol-lowering effect of nuts appears to be more pronounced in people with elevated cholesterol concentrations, BMI < 25 kg/m², and those who are insulin-sensitive. The evidence for blood pressure, stroke, hypertension, atrial fibrillation, and diabetes is limited and warrants further investigation. Studies suggest improvements in antioxidant status; and oxidative stress, markers of inflammation and endothelial dysfunction could be another potential mechanism for the cardio-protective effect of nut consumption. However, the evidence is less conclusive as improvements may not necessarily be attributed to nuts *per se*, since background diets were also modified.

Both epidemiological and clinical studies have reported that despite the high energy and fat content of nuts, regular nut consumption does not appear to negatively affect body weight. It is important to highlight that no studies to date have demonstrated a detrimental effect of nut consumption on health. Nuts can therefore be incorporated as part of a heart-healthy diet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the General Population

Nuts provide concentrated source of unsaturated fat, fibre, vitamin E, and a number of other nutrients often in short supply in the modern diet. Frequent nut consumption could be an effective way to achieve adequate essential nutrient intakes and maintain general well being. As different nuts have varying amounts of micronutrients, eating a selection is ideal.

To gain the most health benefit from nuts, it is important not to add salt, sugar or other fats, so unprocessed nuts are best. Raw nuts should be consumed with the skin on, as most of the antioxidants and phytochemicals are located in the pellicle or outer soft shell of the nut. Nuts can also be dry roasted by putting them in a shallow dish in the oven at a low to medium heat (around 100°C), stirring them occasionally until they have the desired crunch. Store nuts in a cool, dry, dark place.

The cost of nuts is often mentioned as a barrier to consumption. However, depending on the types and the sources, 30 g of nuts (excluding pine nuts) should cost less than \$1.50. Even smaller amounts eaten regularly are better than none at all.

Nuts are the ultimate fast food, convenient, and easy to carry around. If you feel really hungry during morning or afternoon tea time, nuts can tide you over nicely until your lunch or evening meal.

Regular consumption of 30 g of raw nuts (a small handful) is recommended to improve diet quality and to reduce several risk factors associated with heart disease. This effect is more pronounced when nuts are consumed in place of unhealthy foods, which are highly processed with excessive amounts of salt, sugar, saturated fat, and trans fat (a fat often found in processed food).

Eating a serve of nuts each day should not adversely affect body weight in the general population. This is especially apparent when nuts replace other foods, instead of having them as add-ons to one's usual diet.

Limited evidence suggests that the lipid-lowering effect of nut butter is comparable to whole nuts (eg. peanut butter). Thus, regular consumption of one serve of plain nut butter (2 tablespoons) may improve cardiovascular risk factors. Plain nut butter can be used to replace other spreads. Some nut butters contain added salt, sugar, and oil. Choose varieties low in added salt and sugar.

For those with or at high risk of heart disease

Individuals with high blood cholesterol concentrations should consume 30 g of nuts per day as a means of reducing blood cholesterol.

Individuals at high risk of heart disease may benefit from consuming raw nuts in place of less healthy snacks. This could further improve other risk factors of heart disease including inflammatory markers and endothelial function.

Inclusion of one serve of nuts or plain nut butter per day should not adversely affect body weight in high risk populations.

For Health Professionals

Recent research has shown the general public will increase their nut consumption when recommended to do so by a health professional^(252,253). Thus, health professionals should recommend the intake of 30 g of nuts per day as part of a heart healthy diet.

The perception by the general public that nuts are "fattening" is incorrect. Inclusion of a serve of nuts (30 g) in a person's regular diet should not adversely affect body weight. This is especially apparent when nuts replace other foods. Plain nut butter, instead of other spreads, can be consumed as part of a healthy diet without compromising body weight.