Research continues to prove that nuts are an important part of a healthy diet due to their many health benefits. Eaten as a snack food or an ingredient in recipes, nuts can give your diet a nutritional boost.

**Basic Nutrition**

Tree nuts are plant-based proteins that contain fiber and a combination of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants for each variety. Some of the nutrients include protein, zinc, magnesium, selenium, vitamin E, folate, calcium, phosphorus, and omega 3 fatty acids. They are also rich in plant sterols and fat, particularly the heart-healthy mono- and polysaturated kinds. They are cholesterol free and have just a trace of sodium.

For the sake of ease, we are also including peanuts in this category of nuts. Peanuts are technically a legume (a dried pea, bean, or lentil), but they are used like nuts and have a similar nutrient profile. Tree nuts grow above the ground, whereas peanuts grow below the ground.

**Health Benefits**

The 2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans encourages us to consume a variety of proteins, including seafood, lean meats and poultry, eggs, legumes and nuts, seeds, and soy proteins. Nuts contain more unsaturated fats than animal proteins, so they help provide us with a healthier fat intake.

Though nuts are a higher-fat food, it is mostly heart-healthy unsaturated fat and may help lower low-density lipoproteins (LDL cholesterol). Nuts also contain phytosterols, which may help lower cholesterol and decrease your risk of heart disease.

Two large recently completed research studies linked the intake of 5 or more ounces of nuts per week to a 35 to 50 percent reduction in the risk of coronary heart disease and death. Nuts definitely provide heart-disease-fighting benefits. The combination of fiber, protein, and fat in nuts helps you feel fuller longer, so you may eat less during the day. This can make them an excellent option for weight control. The key is to watch your portion sizes. Nuts are dense in calories and can easily add too many in your diet. To get their health benefits without overdoing it on your calories, substitute nuts for other foods in your diet, particularly those high in saturated fat. Limiting your amounts to 1 to 2 ounces per day is a good rule to follow.

Choose dry roasted instead of honey roasted nuts to avoid excess sugar and calories, and select unsalted or lightly salted nuts to keep the sodium level down in your diet since high sodium intake has been linked to high blood pressure.

**Recommended Serving Size**

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends up to 1½ ounces, or 1½ handfuls, of nuts daily. A handful equals about 1 ounce. This is the serving size listed on the Nutrition Facts panel on food labels. On average, a 1½-ounce serving is equal to about ½ cup of nuts. Refer to the label on your favorite nut to find out how many equal a 1½-ounce serving.
Examine Your Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>What I do now</th>
<th>What I plan to buy/change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nuts</td>
<td>Eat cereal for breakfast</td>
<td>Sprinkle chopped walnuts on my oatmeal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eat chips for a snack</td>
<td>Eat 1½ ounces of almonds for a snack</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Strawberry-Spinach Salad**
Serving size: makes four 1-cup servings

**INGREDIENTS**
- 4 cups torn fresh spinach
- 1 cup sliced fresh strawberries
- 2 Tbsp chopped pecans or walnuts
- 1 Tbsp finely chopped onion
- 1½ Tbsp sunflower seeds, toasted
- ½ tsp sesame seeds, toasted
- 1 Tbsp canola oil
- 1 Tbsp red wine vinegar
- 1½ Tbsp sugar
- ½ tsp mustard
- ¼ tsp dried dill
- ⅛ tsp salt
- Pinch garlic powder

**DIRECTIONS**
1. In a salad bowl, combine the spinach, strawberries, onion, nuts, sunflower seeds, and sesame seeds.
2. In a jar with a tight-fitting lid, combine the remaining ingredients; shake well. (Dressing can also be whisked together in a small bowl.) Pour dressing over salad and toss gently. Serve immediately.

**NUTRITIONAL FACTS**
Per serving: 123 calories, 2 grams protein, 7 grams carbohydrates, 7.5 grams fat.

Recipe source: *Dining for Diabetes Cookbook* (West Virginia University).

**Tips**
1-ounce serving = 6 Brazil nuts, 10–12 macadamia nuts, 14 walnut halves, 18 cashews, 19 pecan halves, 21 hazelnuts, 23 almonds, 28 peanuts, 49 pistachios, or 167 pine nuts

Create your own homemade trail mix by adding your favorite nut(s) to whole-wheat cereal, pretzel pieces, sunflower seeds, and raisins, dates, or other dried fruits. Package into snack-sized baggies and enjoy.

**Sources**


U.S. Food and Drug Administration, [www.fda.gov/food](www.fda.gov/food).