

Protein, fats and fibre: All found in peanuts!



Protein, fats and fibre are the major components that make up peanuts. The good news is that these components are all the healthy aspects when it comes to peanuts. The protein is plant based, the fat is unsaturated and fibre is the main type of complex carbohydrate found in peanuts. It makes sense that these three healthy components come together in peanuts, bearing in mind all that is known about the benefits of eating groundnuts especially when one considers chronic disease and weight management.

Peanuts have been recognised as a protein source, since peanut butter became a sought-after commodity at the time of World War II when meat was not readily available. A one ounce serving, roughly about a handful, is considered to be an excellent source of protein by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of the United States (US), and adds seven grams to your diet. Peanuts are actually a legume and have more protein than any other nut, with

levels comparable to or better than a serving of beans.

Since the protein in peanuts is plant based, it contains additional components that have positive health benefits such as fibre and unique bioactives, unlike in the case of animal protein. Peanuts are high in arginine (Arg) and amino acid (AA), which is one of the building blocks of protein. This AA is a precursor to nitric oxide (NO), a compound that expands one's blood vessels. It has been thought to help in decreasing blood pressure.

In fact, in a study titled the *Optimal Macronutrient Intake Trial for Heart Health (OmniHeart)* (Appel, 2005), three diets were compared to determine the effects on blood pressure as well as the optimal diet pattern for reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease (Swain, 2008).

The first diet was based on the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet, which emphasises carbohydrates. The second contained a higher fat level from healthy unsaturated fats. The third diet had higher protein levels, over half of which were from plant sources, including peanuts and peanut butter.

The study showed that in addition to the benefits of substituting healthy fat for carbohydrates in the DASH diet, substituting healthy protein also further reduced blood pressure and the risk of heart disease.

Adding peanuts to your diet is a way to add healthy protein. Along with that you will be adding key nutrients and bioactives such as Arg that can contribute to improving your blood pressure, decreasing chronic disease risk and to promoting longevity.

When one considers healthy fats, peanuts, peanut butter and peanut oil come to mind. That is because at least half of the fat in peanuts represents heart-healthy, monounsaturated fat, the kind found in olive oil and avocados. Additionally, over 30% is polyunsaturated fat – another good fat which is key in a healthy diet.

For the first time, a key recommendation documented in dietary guidelines is to consider a protein package that brings good fats along with it by putting emphasis on eating more plant-based proteins such as peanuts, since they contain healthy monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats and other essential nutrients. It is thrilling to realise that peanuts are a food recommended for health – and one which tastes great too!

At Pennsylvania State University, a human study was conducted that fed diets including peanuts and peanut butter or peanut oil as sources of high monounsaturated fat to subjects, and compared this diet to a lowfat one higher in carbohydrates, an olive oil diet also high in monounsaturated fat and a traditional American diet high in saturated fat.

Olive oil diet

Compared to the American diet, subjects following the high monounsaturated fat peanut diets lowered their total cholesterol by 11% and bad low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol by 14%, while their good high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol was maintained (Kris-Etherton, 1999). The benefits of the peanut diets on cholesterol were comparable to the olive oil diet. In addition, the peanut diets reduced triglycerides (TGs), whereas they were increased in the lowfat diet.

Emerging data clearly indicates that the amount and type of fat we eat can impact our health in various ways (Kris-Etherton, 2002; Harris, 2009). Choosing

peanuts, peanut butter, and peanut oil as part of one's diet will help to absorb more healthy fats, the type best for heart health.

Harmful fats

Simply stated, knowing that peanuts are high in healthy fats tells us that they are low in the so-called 'bad fats' – the ones science has found which may not be as favourable to our health. Saturated fat is found most often in animal products, whereas trans-unsaturated fatty acids (trans fat) originates from the processing of partially hydrogenated oils.

When bad fats are substituted with healthy ones, our risk of cardiovascular disease can be reduced.

Peanuts, peanut butter and peanut oil are all low in saturated fat. Peanuts and their oil naturally do not contain any trans fat, and although a small amount of partially hydrogenated fat is used as a stabiliser to make peanut butter creamier, a US Department of Agriculture study tested eleven commercial brands of peanut butter and found that in all of these, levels of trans fat were not detectable (Sanders, 2001).

In fact, the amount of trans fat in peanut butter with 2% stabiliser is 156 times less than what is required to reach the 0g trans fat cutoff on food labels (Sanders, 2001). Major US-based health organisations such as the American Heart Association (AHA) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) also recommend keeping saturated fat low and trans fat as low as possible in one's diet.

Scientific studies have shown that when bad fats in a diet are substituted with healthy ones, our risk of cardiovascular disease can be reduced (Hu, 1997). The risk of other types of chronic disease as well as inflammation in the body may also be improved by such

healthier choices. Peanuts, peanut butter and peanut oil are natural options that can help us abide by these guidelines and to add more healthy fats to one's diet. Since peanuts are a plant food, they also do not contain cholesterol.

Fibre content

When one considers fibre, fruits, vegetables and whole grains come to mind. However, did you know that a serving of peanuts is also a good source of fibre, according to the FDA? Fibre is a healthy carbohydrate and ingesting it provides various benefits to our health. Fibre is also commonly known for its ability to regulate the digestive system.

It adds bulk to our diets, helping us to feel full, and can slow down the absorption of certain foods so that blood sugar levels are better controlled and maintained. Studies have shown that diets high in fibre can also contribute to lower total and bad LDL cholesterol and a reduced risk of heart disease.

Over a third of the carbohydrates found in peanuts is fibre. This may contribute to the fact that peanuts have a low glycaemic index (GI) and glycaemic load (GL) (FosterPowell, 2002). On a 100-point scale, the GI of peanuts is 14, and its GL is one. What this means is that when these nuts are consumed, the fluctuations in our blood sugar and subsequent insulin levels are less significant than with foods that can make our blood sugar rise and fall rapidly such as when ingesting certain refined grains or sugar beverages, for instance.

These guidelines highlight fibre as one of the main nutrients lacking in the typical American diet. Consuming more plant-based protein sources, such as peanuts and peanut butter can help one remain fuller longer. America's comfort food can bring more than just feelings of contentment. Fibre, in addition to the number of other nutrients found in peanuts, is improving our health with each handful.

For more information, visit the Peanut Institute's website
www.peanut-institute.org

