

The Athlete's Kitchen

by Nancy Clark, MS RD CSSD; Copyright: May 2009

Nuts & Runners: Love 'em or leave 'em?

Runners commonly have a love-hate relationship with nuts. They love them, but try to stay away from them. "I don't dare keep a jar of almonds in my house. I'd end up eating them all and gaining weight," complained one runner. Although he knows nuts are healthful and good for him, the over-ruling perception is nuts are "sooooo fattening."

While nuts are indeed a calorie-dense food, the good news is nut-eaters are not fatter than people who avoid nuts (1). That's because nuts are satiating; that is, they stay with you and keep you feeling "fed." A woman-size handful of nuts (150 to 200 calories) for an afternoon snack often ends up being lower in calories than the 100-calorie pack of crackers that leads to another and yet another 100-calorie pack because you are still hungry. Snacks like crackers, pretzels and rice cakes fail to keep you satiated because they lack fiber, protein, and fat—and that's what nuts have to offer.

A study with overweight teens highlights this point. The students were part of "The Family Lifestyle and Over-weight Prevention Program" in Houston, TX (2). The teens were given a healthy after school snack to help improve the quality of their diet: nuts and peanut butter along with fruits and vegetables (such as apple slices with peanut butter, baby carrots dipped in peanut butter, trail mix with peanuts and dried fruits). These snacks replaced the former popular choices of chips and snack cakes. The kids lost weight and kept it off—and equally important, they liked the snacks. There's no denying a plain apple may seem "boring" and unpopular because it is not substantial enough to satisfy afternoon hunger. But add some peanut butter, and that apple becomes a welcomed treat!

When the afternoon munchies strike, I invite you to "go nuts" (in moderation) and observe the benefits of eating a handful of nuts. You may well discover you are less hungry for a longer period of time. While a few rice cakes may fill you for half an hour, a few nuts might last for 2.5 hours (3).

If you are afraid the "handful" will turn into a "jarful", remember the best way to take the power away from a "trouble food" is to eat it more often. That is, if you end up overeating nuts (or any food, for that matter), you may be thinking "I just blew my diet by eating some cashews, so I might as well eat the whole jar to get rid of them. Then, I can get back on my diet." Or, if you are at a social event and end up eating too many peanuts, you might be thinking "This is my last chance to eat peanuts before I go back on my diet. I'd better eat them all now because I shouldn't eat them ever again."

The solution to over-eating nuts is to change your relationship with them and acknowledge you like nuts: "I enjoy nuts so much, I'm going to eat them more often—at every meal and snack!" That way, you eliminate your fear of being denied of this favorite food. You won't have to eat the whole jar, because another jar will be waiting in the pantry. While this might sound scary to overeaters, the reality is, after three days of eating nuts at every meal and snack, you likely will be content to cut back to enjoying nuts once or twice a day and no longer will they have any power over you.

Which nuts are best?

OK, so now that I have convinced you to include nuts in your sports snacks (and meals), you might be wondering “What is the best kind of nut to eat?” That is like asking, “What is the best fruit to choose?” The answer is, each type of nut offers its own special health benefits. Almonds have a little more fiber than cashews; walnuts have a little more polyunsaturated fat than hazelnuts; peanuts have a little more vitamin E than walnuts—but no one nut is distinctly superior to another one. So, rather than get caught up in trying to choose the “best” nut, simply buy a variety of nuts for a variety of nutrients, flavors, and health-protective attributes. Enjoy—

- slivered almonds on your morning cereal
- a peanut butter and banana sandwich at lunch

(Now doesn't that sound more substantial than yet-another turkey sandwich? Don't panic about the calories! Rather, notice how peanut butter will keep you feeling fed, so you don't end up eating abundant calories of sweets later in the afternoon.)

- trail mix with cashews and dried fruit in the afternoon
- walnuts in your dinner salad.

What's so healthy about nuts for athletes?

Nuts offer far more than just calories. They are filled with hard-to-get nutrients that can easily get processed out of refined foods. By the end of the day, nut eaters tend to have a diet with overall higher nutrient quality (4). Nuts offer magnesium, niacin, vitamin E, copper, and manganese, as well as other phytochemicals that are health protective, like resveratrol (reduces heart disease). All this means, nuts have a powerful impact on your health.

Nuts protect against the diseases of aging. That is, people who eat nuts or peanut butter five or more times a week reduce their risk of heart disease and diabetes by more than 20% (1). That's impressive! Incorporating some nuts along with your pretzel- or rice cake snack offers both health and weight-management advantages.

If you are enjoying nuts as a recovery food after a hard run, be sure to eat some carbs along with the nuts. While the protein and (healthful) fat in nuts abates hunger and helps build muscles, only carbs (re)fuel your muscles. Some carb-protein nut combinations include: peanut butter + banana; nuts + dried fruit; almonds + (packet of instant) oatmeal.

Nuts offer only a little protein—for example, about 8 grams in two tablespoons peanut butter (the amount in a typical sandwich). This is not much, considering the protein needs of most active women are 60 to 90 grams, and active men may need 80 to 120 grams. Hence, vegetarian runners need to really eat a lot of nuts and peanut butter if this is their main source of protein!

Easier yet, boost your protein intake by adding this childhood memory back into your daily sports diet: a glass of milk along with the peanut butter sandwich! In general, enjoy nuts, in moderate portions, as an integral part of your meals and snacks.

Nancy Clark, MS, RD, CSSD (Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics) counsels both casual and competitive athletes in her practice at Healthworks, the premier fitness center in Chestnut Hill MA (617-383-6100). Her *Sports Nutrition Guidebook*, *Food Guides for New Runners*, and *Food Guide for Marathoners* are available via www.nancyclarkrd.com. See also www.sportsnutritionworkshop.com.

References

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Sidebar: Calories in Nuts

An ounce of nuts—a woman-size handful or ¼ cup— offers about 150 to 200 calories. Here's how nuts compare:

Nut	# per ounce (approx)	Calories/oz	Calories/nut (approx)
Almonds	28	170	6
Cashews	23	160	7
Macademia	27	200	8
Peanuts	30	160	5
Pecans	15	200	13
Walnuts	14	185	13