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### Pass the Pecans

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*Pecans lower the risk of heart disease and diabetes.*



## Pass the Pecans

*Pecans are loaded with antioxidants.*

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

**P**eanuts, pistachios, pecans, pine nuts and pumpkin seeds — all are healthy choices. Their regular use can reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke by about 50 percent. So what is different about pecans? Pecans contain the highest level of polyphenolics of all the nuts and seeds, and are close to the top of all foods for antioxidant capacity.

Pecans tie with walnuts as the second most consumed tree nut in the U.S., behind almonds. The United States produces about 80 to 90 percent of the world's crop. Pecans belong to the same family as walnut and butternut.

Pecans have been an important food in the diet of Native American tribes in central and southern regions of the U.S. The tender, crunchy texture and rich, buttery flavor make pecans suitable for use in cooking, bakery goods (fruit cakes, pecan pies and cookies), savory dishes and ice cream. They also are enjoyed raw or toasted, and added to salads.

Taking a daily handful of pecans was observed to lower LDL and total cholesterol and triglyceride levels by about 10 percent, and prevented LDL cholesterol oxidation by about 30 percent, while raising the HDL cholesterol. All these changes are associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease. Pecans are rich in plant sterols, which are known for their cholesterol-lowering ability.

The fat profile of pecans is cardioprotective. An ounce of pecans (20 halves) provides 20 grams fat, two-thirds of which is healthy monounsaturated fat, and only 2 grams are saturated fat. One to two percent of the fat in pecans is the valuable omega-3 fat. Pecans contain many vitamins and minerals, including vitamin A, vitamin E, folic acid, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, copper, manganese, several B vitamins, iron, zinc and some calcium. Pecans are also



sodium-free, making them an excellent choice for those on a sodium-restricted diet. Additionally pecans are a good source of protein — 1 ounce provides 10 percent of the recommended daily value for fiber.

Arginine is a major amino acid in pecans. Arginine is used to make nitric oxide, a potent vasodilator, and clearly is important in maintaining desirable blood pressure levels. The numerous antioxidants (vitamin E, flavonoids and phenolic acids) in pecans help protect against cellular damage. A study with mice showed that adding pecans to their diet produced a significant delay in the decline of age-related motor function compared to mice receiving no pecans.

The high energy content of nuts, such as pecans, does not appear to cause weight gain. Survey data shows that nut consumers have a lower BMI than those who never eat nuts. The high fiber, protein and low glycemic index of nuts contributes to their increased satiety. The Nurses' Health Study showed that the regular consumption of nuts also had a beneficial effect on insulin sensitivity.

Adding pecans to your diet would be a smart move. While their flavor, palatability and texture are enjoyable, they also offer you several health benefits. Regular nut consumption significantly lowers the level of C-reactive protein and interleukin-6, important markers of inflammation.

Winston J. Craig, Ph.D., M.P.H., RD, is a professor of nutrition and chair of the Department of Health and Wellness at Andrews University.