

# Benefits of Nuts and a Change at FDA

*By ACSH Staff — July 24, 2003*

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently instituted more lenient regulations regarding the level of scientific evidence needed to note health benefits of certain foods on packages. The FDA determined the benefits of nuts to be at a "B" level on its new ranking system of A (scientifically proven) to D (almost no evidence), according to Lauren Neergaard of the Associated Press. Previously, the FDA did not permit food manufacturers to make qualified health claims on its products.

"Scientific evidence suggests but does not prove that eating 1.5 ounces per day of most nuts as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease," states the new, FDA-approved labels on packages of almonds, pecans, pistachios, walnuts, and peanuts.

The nut industry seeks to further corroborate its claims. Christine Taylor, FDA nutrition chief, remarked that the nut industry "is talking with the FDA about more research to hunt proof of nuts' benefits."

The FDA is encouraging "science-based labeling" and "competition for healthy dietary choices," according to Steven Milloy of JunkScience.com. He remains skeptical, though, noting that despite many studies that conclude that the consumption of unsaturated fats present in the FDA-approved nuts have decreased rates of disease, "not all studies make these connections."

The American Heart Association suggests the consumption of unsalted, dry roasted nuts as meat substitutes, as one component of a "heart-healthy diet." Many types of nuts serve as good sources of fiber and protein and none contain cholesterol. Although relatively high in fat and calories, the fats in nuts are predominantly mono- and polyunsaturated, which many nutrition experts believe help to decrease LDL ("bad") cholesterol. Other sources of mono- and polyunsaturated fats include olive, sesame, and canola oils and certain types of fish, including mackerel and salmon.

One ounce of nuts, which might vary in composition from seven walnuts to twenty-two almonds, has about 170 calories and is the caloric equivalent of one fourteen-ounce soda, a few small cookies, one and a half cups of potato chips, or two and a half tablespoons of Italian dressing, according to the American Dietetic Association (ADA). Due to the high calorie content of nuts, the ADA recommends decreasing the amount of calories that are consumed from other foods in a person's diet if that person starts consuming more nuts. The ADA maintains that the benefits of nut consumption are valuable enough to warrant making such a change.

Christine Taylor at FDA says the calorie count shouldn't stop the labeling change: "The feeling was, as long as they help consumers to understand this contribute quite a bit of calories, they should be allowed to make the claim."

However, not all types of nuts are deemed "heart-healthy" by the FDA. For instance, macadamia

nuts, which contain more saturated fat than other nuts, are not permitted to have a label claiming the health benefits, because elevated levels of saturated fat can increase blood cholesterol levels, and thus perhaps the risk of heart disease.

The new labels are restricted to approved packages of nuts, not to products that contain only limited amounts of nuts, such as ice cream with nut toppings. According to CBS News, the Almond Board of California recommended that, for instance, consumers substitute a handful of almonds for a "less healthy snack."

Consumers should note the "B" rating on packages of nuts and not assume nuts will definitely reduce the risk of heart disease. Neither should the health benefits of nuts be dismissed, despite the high levels of fat and calories that they contain.

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