

Pecan nuts are one of only a handful of common modern foods that originated in North America. For centuries, pecan nuts were enjoyed by Native Americans across what is now the south-central region of the United States. American settlers in the 1800s brought pecan trees westward to New Mexico and quickly recognized the Mesilla Valley's soils and climate as ideally suited to production of top quality pecans. As a result, southern New Mexico is now one of the world's premier pecan growing areas, and pecan nuts have come to be featured prominently in New Mexico's distinctive cuisine.

In the 1980s and 1990s, nutritionists usually discouraged people from regularly eating pecans because of their high fat and calorie content. More recently, however, pecans have received much more positive attention because of a shift in how nutritionists think about including fats in the diet. Furthermore, recent research, some of which was conducted here at New Mexico State University, has shown that regular pecan nut consumption may in fact have a number of important health benefits.

### Some health related benefits of pecans include:

- Pecans are an excellent source of the monounsaturated fat oleic acid, which is also found in olives and olive oil. Saturated fats (found in meats, whole milk, butter and lard) and trans fats (found in shortening and stick margarines) are usually solid at room temperature and are associated with increased cardiovascular disease risk. On the other hand, unsaturated fats, like oleic acid in pecans, are usually liquid at room temperature and may actually have cardiovascular health benefits. The American Heart Association and the Expert Panel of the National Cholesterol Education Program both recommend that unsaturated fats replace saturated fat in the American diet.

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<h2>Pecan</h2>	
<h3>Nutrition Facts</h3>	
Serving Size 1 oz (about 20 pecan halves)	
<b>Amount Per Serving</b>	
<b>Calories</b>	196
Calories from Fat 171	
	<b>% DV/DRI*</b>
<b>Total Fat</b> 20g	31%
Saturated Fat 2g	12%
Trans Fat 0g	
Polyunsaturated Fat 6g	30%
Monounsaturated Fat 12g	50%
<b>Cholesterol</b> 0mg	0%
<b>Sodium</b> 0mg	0%
<b>Potassium</b> 116mg	3%
<b>Total Carbohydrate</b> 4g	1%
Dietary Fiber 3g	8%
Sugars 1g	
Other Carbohydrates 0g	
<b>Protein</b> 3g	3%
Vitamin A 0%	Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 2%	Iron 9%
Vitamin E <sup>†</sup> 3%	Thiamin 16%
Riboflavin 3%	Niacin 2%
Folate 1%	Vitamin B <sub>6</sub> 5%
Phosphorus 11%	Magnesium 8%
Zinc 12%	Copper 38%

\*Percent Daily Values (%DV) established by the USDA for a 2,000 calorie diet are presented for fats and protein. Percent Dietary Reference Intakes (%DRI) are presented for all other nutrients based on standards established by the National Academy of Sciences for males aged 19-50. Daily nutrient requirement is affected by age, gender, pregnancy and lactation; depending on these factors, your daily reference intake may be higher or lower than those presented here.

<sup>†</sup>Vitamine E as  $\alpha$ -tocopherol. Pecans also contain  $\beta$ ,  $\gamma$  and  $\delta$  tocopherols.

- Pecans are a healthful food also because of what they do not contain. As a plant food, pecans contain no dietary cholesterol. In fact, eating pecans can help to lower blood cholesterol levels. In one New Mexico State University experiment, eating pecans every day for eight weeks helped lower volunteers' LDL-cholesterol (sometimes called "bad" cholesterol) by 6%.
- Pecans are a good food source of other nutrients that contribute to a heart healthy diet. These include dietary fiber, vitamin E, copper, and magnesium. According to United States Department of Agriculture figures, pecans are also among the best food sources of phytochemicals that are antioxidants. Nutrition scientists recommend these substances because they may reduce the risk of cancers and cardiovascular disease.
- What you eat influences your chances of getting high blood pressure (hypertension). As part of an overall dietary approach to reducing blood pressure, the National Institutes of Health suggests incorporating nuts into your weekly diet. Of course, for keeping your blood pressure down, it is also important to maintain a healthy weight; to be moderately physically active most days of the week;<sup>2</sup> if you drink alcohol, to drink moderately; and to take prescribed medication for high blood pressure as directed.
- Pecan nuts contain few carbohydrates and are a very low glycemic index food, which means that eating pecans has little impact on one's short-term blood glucose levels. As such, eating pecans in moderation is consistent with a healthy diet for people with diabetes or those at risk of getting diabetes. Again, it must be emphasized that maintaining a healthy weight and taking medication as directed by your doctor are critical for managing or preventing diabetes.

### Adding Pecans to Your Diet

Pecans are a high calorie food and are often included as part of sugary recipes such as pecan pies, pralines or cookies; families should take this into account in weight management. However, pecans also contain many desirable nutrients and help lower bad cholesterol, so pecans may be included in modest amounts as a healthy part of a family's usual diet. Pecans can be eaten plain as a healthy snack instead of chips or sweets, and also make an excellent addition to salads, breakfast cereals, breads, entrees, and side dishes. The delicious taste of pecans enhances the flavor of many recipes that are family favorites.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on physical activity, see our Extension publication, Physical Activity and You (for Adults) at [http://cahe.nmsu.edu/pubs/\\_i/I-101.pdf](http://cahe.nmsu.edu/pubs/_i/I-101.pdf) and Physical Activity and Kids (School Age): Information for Parents at [http://cahe.nmsu.edu/pubs/\\_i/I-103.pdf](http://cahe.nmsu.edu/pubs/_i/I-103.pdf).

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### Pecans and Allergies

For most people, pecans can be eaten as part of a healthy diet. However, it is possible to be allergic to pecans. Tree nuts – such as almonds, Brazil nuts, cashews, hazelnuts, macadamia nuts, pecans, pine nuts, pistachios and walnuts – have been implicated in allergic reactions in both children and adults. Allergic reactions to tree nuts can range from mild to severe (including life-threatening).

One research study, using a random survey of about 13,500 people in the U.S. (adults, adolescents and children), found that about 1 out of 250 people had an allergy to tree nuts.

A person can be allergic to only one specific nut and not allergic to others; or, they can have an allergy to more than one nut. Most experts advise patients who are allergic to a specific tree nut to avoid all tree nuts (as well as the peanut, which is not a tree nut but a legume).

### Sources

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