

In a Nutshell

The scoop on a food that's more than it's cracked up to be

by MADELEINE GREY

During a kindergarten class years ago, my son replied to that standard “What do you want to be when you grow up?” question with an unexpected answer: “A cashew man.” His teacher probably thought he was nuts, but I knew exactly what had shaped his career choice: a nut-chomping dad. Father and son are nicknamed The Cashew Men in our house. My guys don't care if their daily handful is healthy; they just love the taste.

That's good news for nuts — a beleaguered food that fell from nutritional grace during the low-fat craze and is prohibited in many schools and daycares to protect children with life-threatening allergies.

But for those of us who aren't allergic, there's good reason to go nuts. Whether you crave peanuts, pecans or pistachios, all are a good source of protein and high in dietary fibre. Nuts contain vitamin E, a host of B vitamins and minerals like magnesium, zinc, copper and selenium.

Along with all those vitamins and minerals, though, comes a considerable amount of fat and calories. Some 70 to 97% of the calories in nuts are derived from fat. But that's not bad news.

“Nuts used to be thought of as taboo because of their high fat content,” says David Jenkins, a spokesperson for the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada and a professor with the department of nutritional sciences at the University of Toronto. “But the truth is, the fat they contain is mainly monounsaturated or ‘good fat.’”

The fat's been labelled “good” because it's associated with lowering blood cholesterol levels and reducing heart disease risk factors. And while you might not consider that a childhood health concern, research shows otherwise: A Texas study tracked 1,182 third-graders for two years and concluded that their diets affected cholesterol the same way as adult diets do. So, even children in the normal weight range need to watch their intake of “bad” or saturated fat for they too can develop high cholesterol.

A further feather in a nut's nutritional cap arrived in July 2003, when the United States Food and Drug Administration approved a qualified

health claim for packaged nuts, stating “scientific evidence suggests but does not prove” that a 1½ oz serving of nuts *per day* (as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol) may reduce the risk of heart disease.

Does this mean it's OK for the whole family to binge on a big bag of mixed nuts every night? Not quite. The catch is in the not-so-fine print, which cautions us to enjoy just *a serving* per day.

So think of nuts as more than just a snack food. Chop some up and sprinkle them on morning cereal, toss them in a leafy green salad, scatter them over yogurt or add them to stir-fries (see recipe). Pack raw or dry-roasted nuts in snack bags for car trips, hikes or outings. Nuts make a quick and easy after-school snack. For optimum health, purchase nuts raw (most bulk and health food stores stock them) and toast in a 350°F (180°C) oven in a single layer for 5 to 8 minutes or until golden.

Another way to increase your nuttiness is baking — as long as your

Stir-Fried Chicken with Cashews and Red Peppers
See recipe, p. 68.



Nut So Fast

Before you go completely nutty with your kids, consider these health hazards:

- “Check with your family doctor, paediatrician or allergist before introducing nuts to any baby,” says Toronto dietitian Sue Mah. “If there is a family history of nut allergies, you should delay introduction until the age of 3.” If there are no medical concerns surrounding nut allergies for a 12-month-old baby, she suggests spreading a very thin layer of nut butter on a piece of toast or cracker to reduce the chance of choking.
- “Whole nuts present a choking hazard for small children and should be avoided until the age of 4,” says Mah. Big globs of nut butter on soft bread are also hard to swallow, so go thin when spreading nut butters to children aged 4 and under.

child isn't compelled to pick them out in disgust. And few kids can resist peanut butter. Note, however, that most commercial brands of peanut butter contain trans fats (check on the label for the code word "hydrogenated").

Among all the nutty choices out there, says Toronto dietitian Sue Mah, three top the nutritional chart: peanuts, walnuts and almonds. Peanuts are not only heart-healthy but, like their other bean brethren (everyone knows peanuts are not a tree nut but a legume, don't they?), they also contain more cell-building folate than any other nut, are high in fibre and a good source of protein and iron — a mineral many children's diets are low in.

Mah likes walnuts for their omega-3 fatty acid content and points out that a 1 oz serving of almonds has 100 mg of bone-building calcium or the equivalent of 1/3 glass of milk.

All these nutrients under one shell, plus the bonus of protein, make nuts an important part of childhood nutrition — especially for vegetarians. "Vegetarian diets can be lower in fat, which is not ideal for a growing child. The healthy fats in nuts can add to a vegetarian child's fat intake," says Mah.

I've decided not to tell the little cashew man in my life about all the health rewards in his favourite food. As he smears another peanut butter sandwich all over his face or downs another handful of cashews, I plan to simply smile and shut up. It's a nice feeling. ♥

How Big Is a Serving?

Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating recommends a serving size of 2 tbsp (30 mL) of nut butter or about 1/4 cup of nuts for adults and children 7 years and up. Cut the portion in half for kids aged 4 to 6. Avoid whole nuts for kids under 4 and serve only nut butters.

Today's Parent.com

Get healthy eating advice from Madeleine Greedy in her monthly food forum. This month, Madeleine will answer questions on Tuesday, March 1 at Todaysparent.com/forums.

Stir-Fried Chicken with Cashews and Red Peppers

I like this spicy, but my kids don't. If you can relate, consider making half the recipe with chili flakes and half without. Or, simply sprinkle chili flakes on the heat lovers' portions.

1 lb (500 g) boneless chicken breast

MARINADE

1 tbsp (15 mL) cornstarch
 1 tbsp (15 mL) sherry or cooking wine
 1 tbsp (15 mL) soy sauce
 1 tsp (5 mL) sesame oil
 1/2 tsp (2 mL) sugar
 freshly ground pepper

SAUCE

1 tbsp (15 mL) soy sauce
 1 tbsp (15 mL) oyster sauce
 2 tbsp (30 mL) water
 1/2 tsp (2 mL) hot red pepper flakes (optional)
 8 tsp (40 mL) canola oil
 2 garlic cloves, chopped
 1/2 cup (125 mL) green onions, chopped
 2 red bell pepper, thinly sliced
 3/4 cup (175 mL) roasted, salted cashews
 2 tbsp (30 mL) coriander, chopped (optional)



Using a chef's knife, slice each chicken breast in half, horizontally, then slice against the grain into 1/4 in. (0.6 cm) thick strips.

In a medium bowl, whisk together marinade ingredients, then add chicken strips. Marinate at least 10 minutes.

In a small bowl, whisk together sauce ingredients. Set aside.

In a wok or large frying pan, heat 4 tsp of the oil on high, add garlic and green onions, and stir-fry for 10 seconds. Add chicken with marinade, arranging in a layer to cover the bottom of the pan. Do not stir, just press down occasionally with spatula; after 1 to 2 minutes when the edges of the chicken turn white, turn over and begin to stir constantly until cooked through, about 3 minutes. Transfer to a plate and set aside.

In a clean wok or large frying pan, heat remaining oil on high, add pepper slices and stir-fry about 3 minutes or until tender. Add reserved chicken mixture and stir, mix in sauce, then add cashews. Stir another 30 seconds to warm the cashews. Garnish with coriander. Serve.

Makes 4 servings.

Our recipe tester, Adell Shneer, tests our Nutrition column using both imperial and metric measurements. However, proportions in the metric version may differ slightly from the original, causing slight variations in the result.

The Dish on Portions

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|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|
| calories | 400 | protein | 31.1 g |
| fat | 23.9 g | carbs | 15.9 g |
| calcium | 3%* | iron | 15%* |
| vitamin A | 23%* | vitamin C | 168%* |

*of recommended daily intake