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macular degeneration
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GO NUTS for good health



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By PATTY LEON
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Let's go nuts. Go all out and get crazy nutty.

We all should get a little nutty, as in adding this protein- and fiber-rich food to our diet.

According to the Mayo Clinic, nuts can be good for your heart.

The reason is that nuts are high in unsaturated fats. These good fats, which are monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, lower the levels of bad cholesterol, low-density lipoproteins (LDL), in the bloodstream.

Nuts are also rich in omega-3 fatty acids. While these fatty acids are found in other foods such as fish — primarily salmon — nuts are the richest source of omega-3 found in plant-based food.

The fiber and plant sterols found in nuts also help lower LDL levels. And nuts are rich in L-arginine, an amino acid known to improve the health of the walls of arteries.

The study reported by the Mayo Clinic indicates that a variety of nuts are good for a heart-healthy diet, but walnuts led the research group. Topping out the other leaders were almonds, macadamia nuts, hazelnuts and pecans.

These are commonly known as tree nuts.

Did you know a peanut isn't a nut? Peanuts grow underground and belong to the legume family like beans and peas. But the heart-health benefits remain the same.

The American Heart Association recommends eating four servings of unsalted nuts a week. Select raw or dry-roasted nuts rather than those cooked in oil. A serving is a small handful (1.5 ounces) of whole nuts.

Keeping your ticker in check seems to be one of the many benefits of eating nuts.

Medical Daily reports that studies show nuts are associated with increased cognitive function — providing protection from Alzheimer's disease — lower mortality risks and the risks of developing chronic diseases, including respiratory and neurodegenerative diseases, diabetes and cancer.

Researchers from Purdue University also found that nuts, while high in calories, are not linked to weight gain.

The same components in the nuts that help lower LDL also help keep your blood sugar stable, and the fiber helps with weight control by helping you feel full.

If you prefer peanut butter rather than the nut, you may still reap some of the health benefits as long as you shop wisely.

Many commercial peanut butter brands add salt, sugar, preservatives and even hydrogenated oils to their final product to enhance shelf life and flavor.

Research done by Purdue University suggests that the addition of these added ingredients may inhibit some of the health benefits.

According to the Peanut Institute, peanut butter — traditional and natural varieties — must contain a minimum of 90 percent peanuts, with no artificial sweeteners, colors or preservatives for the highest health benefit.

You can tell when you have a true natural or organic peanut butter product because the oil tends to separate from the solid butter and requires stirring. Products that use hydrogenated oils stay blended.

If you still desire fried foods or food cooked in a little oil, reach for peanut oil.

According to the Peanut Institute, peanut oil is one of the healthiest oils. It is a vegetable oil that is naturally trans-fat free, cholesterol free, and low in saturated fats. Peanut oil, like olive oil, is high in unsaturated fats, especially monounsaturated fat. It is also a source of the antioxidants vitamin E and phytosterols, which benefit heart-health. Peanut oil is also a perfect choice for healthier frying because it can be heated to a higher temperature than other oils, and this results in lower oil pick up in the food.

Baking cakes and treats can be done using peanut flour.

Peanut flour is a gluten-free and vegan alternative that can add powerful plant-protein and lots of nutrition. Because most of the fat is removed, it is highly concentrated protein and contains about 10-15 grams of protein per ounce. It is also packed with essential nutrients and bioactive molecules. One small scoop (2 tablespoons) is a good source of folate, zinc and potassium and an excellent source of fiber, magnesium, phosphorus and niacin.



Compound protects against cell damage that leads to macular degeneration

By DOUG BENNETT
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA HEALTH

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — For macular degeneration patients, blurry vision emerges slowly as cells in and around the retina get damaged. Now, University of Florida Health researchers have found that a chemical compound improves eyesight in mice with macular degeneration and helps protect human retinal cells.

The compound produced an antioxidant effect on human retinal cells, protecting them against the cell-damaging effect that occurs when oxygen is metabolized. In mouse models, the compound produced sharper vision and preserved the structure of support cells that are crucial to eyesight, researchers found.

Those findings suggest that the drug, and others like it, could be useful in preventing so-called "dry" macular degeneration, according to Alfred S. Lewin, Ph.D., a professor in the

UF College of Medicine department of molecular genetics and microbiology and a faculty member of the UF Genetic Institute. The results were published recently in the journal *Experimental Eye Research*.

There is no current treatment for the "dry" form of macular degeneration, a disease of the retina that causes blurry central vision and sometimes leads to blindness. It accounts for up to 90 percent of the 15 million cases of age-related macular degeneration in the United States, according to the Macular Degeneration Partnership.

During initial testing on human retinal pigment epithelium cells, the compound known as 8-OH-DPAT induced a suite of enzymes that provided protection against damage from oxidation, researchers found. Cell survival improved from 10 percent to about 65 percent when increasingly larger doses of the chemical were used.

Healthy retinal pigment cells are especially

important in preventing dry macular degeneration because they help to support light-sensitive photoreceptor cells that are critical for vision.

Following the testing on human cells, Lewin's team then studied how the chemical worked in a mouse model. After deleting an enzyme to make the retina age faster, researchers treated the mouse models with the chemical for four months. Not only did they find that the retinal tissue was protected, the mouse models also developed sharper vision, Lewin said.

The chemical appears to protect both the retina and its supporting epithelium cells by boosting the production of antioxidant and detoxification proteins, researchers found.

"The most important thing is that there is a class of drugs that may protect against a disease that affects 6 percent of the people over age 50, and a large number of people in Florida. Among this class of drugs, we may be able

to find a tolerable dose that slows down retinal degeneration for people with dry macular degeneration," Lewin said.

While the chemical used in the research has yet to be tested in human clinical trials, researchers said the class of drugs that includes 8-OH-DPAT appear to be safe and worthy of further study. The doses of 8-OH-DPAT used in the research would be considered tolerable in humans, Lewin said.

Now, researchers are studying an oral form of a similar drug that provides the same protective benefits to the retina and surrounding tissue, Lewin said. That drug could be tested in humans relatively soon because it has already undergone a large clinical trial, he added.

Research funding was supplied by grant M2012019 from the BrightFocus Foundation and an Alcon Laboratories Inc. grant. Other support was provided by the Shaler Richardson Professorship endowment and National Eye Institute core grant P30 EY02172.

PEACH STATE HEALTH PLAN OFFERS EXPERT ADVICE FOR COLD AND FLU SEASON

What families should know to avoid the flu

Flu season started in October, and many Georgians are gearing up to get their influenza vaccines. Last year was one of the worst flu seasons in recent memory, with 28 deaths and more than 1,400 flu-related hospitalizations, according to the Georgia Department of Public Health.

Every flu season is different, and influenza infection often affects each individual differently. The vaccine works by causing antibodies to develop in the body about two weeks after vaccination. These antibodies provide protection against flu.

"Everyone 6 months and older is recommended to get a flu vaccination annually," said J. Dean Greeson, M.D., the senior vice president and chief medical officer of the Peach State Health Plan. "High-risk groups including young children, older adults, pregnant women and people with chronic health conditions such as diabetes and asthma are more likely to get severely ill or hospitalized from the flu."

Greeson shares three major ways to fend off the flu:

- Get vaccinated. Many people put off getting a flu shot, but it is a vitally important defense against the flu. Different flu shots are approved for people of different ages. Check the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's influenza page to get an idea of what's recommended for you and your family.
- Wash your hands. This may seem obvious, but handwashing is one of the most effective ways to remove germs and stop them from spreading. It's important to lather up and scrub for at least 20 seconds. Don't forget to lather the backs of your hands, between your fingers and underneath your nails. Don't have soap and water handy? Use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- Take antiviral medication if you're exposed to the flu. Antiviral medications are prescription pills, liquids or inhalers used to prevent or treat flu viruses. Available by prescription, they are approved for adults and children 1 year and older.

For more information on Peach State Health Plan, go to www.pshp.com



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