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Mary A. Keith, PhD, LD/N
Hillsborough County Extension Agent
(813) 744-5519, ext. 136
email: makeith@mail.ifas.ufl.edu

Nuts to You!

Christmas cookies, fruit cake, pies, fudge, brownies, fruit salad, bread stuffing - what do they all have in common this time of year? For many people, the answer is nuts. The holiday season is when our national consumption of nuts definitely goes up (along with our calories, but that's another topic!). Many people can't imagine Christmas without nuts in the kitchen. If you are going to eat nuts, is any one better, or worse, than another?

There is not a whole lot of difference in total calories. All are high because of the fat they contain. One ounce, about 20 to 30 nuts, has between 160 calories for pistachios and 205 calories for macadamia nuts. The others - almonds, cashews, peanuts, pecans and walnuts - are in between those two. When you consider the amount, an ounce is only 2 tablespoons or as many nuts as will fit into one of those little strong mint tins, that's a lot of calories for a little bit of food!

The kind fat is the other big point of discussion. Is it the 'good' kind or the bad? Most nuts (unless you include coconuts) have very little saturated fat. So all of them have the better, unsaturated type of fat. Macadamia nuts and pecans have the most monounsaturated fat, the kind that's usually considered the healthiest for our hearts, and walnuts have the least. Pecans have the most polyunsaturated and macadamias have the least. But the reality is that both of these kinds of fats are pretty healthy. In a healthy, low fat diet, neither mono- or poly- fats have much of an advantage. The important thing is to keep the total amount of fat fairly low so we don't end up with too many calories under our belts.

The other kind of fat that many people want from nuts is omega-3. Walnuts have a lot more omega-3 fat, 2.6 g in an ounce, than other nuts. Pecans have 0.3 g and all the rest have less than 0.1 g per ounce. But the tricky part is that the omega-3 fat that walnuts have is not the kind that protects our hearts or our brains. That kind of omega-3 comes from fish. Our bodies can turn a tiny little bit of the walnut omega-3 into the heart healthy kind. But we'd have to eat an awful lot of walnuts, with all their other fat and calories, to get a significant amount of that kind of omega-3 fat. Have a salmon patty instead.

And if you like nuts, have a few. But stick to a few. Don't eat right out of the jar. It's much too easy to nibble a whole jarful. Fill a mint tin with your 1 ounce allotment for the day, and hide the rest so you're not tempted. Chop them finely to use in recipes, so that a few nuts spread a lot of flavor around. Consider substituting half the nuts with GrapeNuts® in pies or cookies. You'd be surprised how many people won't notice the difference. Add some butter nut extract to boost the flavor if you want. Enjoy the nuts, in your food and in the family. They're all good for us. Happy Holidays!

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