

For a long, healthy life... go nuts!

Richard Béliveau

Translated from Le Journal de Montréal, December 09, 2013

Small habits can have a huge impact on your health. A simple daily handful of nuts is associated with longer lifespans and better health, according to an important study recently published in the New England Journal of Medicine.

In 1970 the American **scientist Ancel Keys** (1904-2004) showed that people who consumed large quantities of saturated fats (butter, red meat) had a risk of heart disease that was much larger than for people who principally ate unsaturated fats of plant origin (e.g. olive oil)⁽¹⁾.

Curiously, rather than directing a transition towards a diet that emphasized the use of these plant-based oils, these observations instead served as a pretext to demonize all foods that were rich in fats, regardless of their nature. This actual phobia of fats ensured that plant products such as avocados and nuts acquired a bad reputation, while the consumption of several foods low in fats but rich in sugar, was encouraged.

This was a monumental error, since this transition from fat to sugar is directly correlated with a marked increase in excess weight and obesity in the population, while the discarding of foods such as nuts deprived many people of an exceptional source of elements that are essential to maintaining good health.

EXCEPTIONAL FRUITS

We use the word “nuts” for fruits that are shelled and oily, that is to say that they contain a large proportion of fatty material in the form of oil. From a botanical point of view, walnuts, hazelnuts, chestnuts and pecans are the only true members of this family, but in practice the term is used to include seeds which possess an appearance and composition similar to nuts, such as almonds, cashews, Brazil nuts, pistachios and peanuts.

All of these fruits are quite exceptional foods, not only because of their content of unsaturated fat with its benefits for the heart, but also because they represent an excellent source of several essential vitamins and minerals (Vitamin E, manganese), fibre and antioxidant compounds.



The importance of regularly consuming nuts is clearly shown by the results of the largest study ever performed on the effect of these foods against the risk of premature death⁽²⁾. Analyzing the consumption of nuts over a 30 year period for 76,464 women and 42,498 men, a team of American scientists showed that these foods had a highly beneficial effect on health, particularly when they were consumed regularly. For example, people who ate nuts once a week had 11% less risk of dying prematurely compared to those who never ate nuts, whereas the risk diminished by 20% with daily consumption of nuts. This increase in longevity associated with the consumption of nuts is directly linked to decreased risk of death caused by heart disease, cancer and respiratory ailments.

SEPARATE THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF

These results show that we must cast a discerning eye and stop seeing all forms of fats as an enemy of good health.

Not all fats are equal: excessive consumption of trans-fats or saturated fats (red meat, fries, chips) is certainly bad for one's health, but plants which are rich in unsaturated fats like nuts are, conversely, among the best foods available for reducing the risk of chronic disease and for increasing lifespan.

Nuts have been consumed by humans since prehistoric times: they are part of our culinary heritage. Modern science confirms their extraordinary benefits.

- (1) Keys, A et al. Coronary heart disease in seven countries. *Circulation* 1970;41(suppl 1):1-211.
- (2) Bao, Y et al. Association of nut consumption with total and cause-specific mortality. *N. Engl. J. Med.* 2013;369(21):2001-2011.