What is the key to a long and healthy life? A new study from Vanderbilt University School of Medicine hints that peanuts may be the answer. Published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, this study shows that consumption of peanuts and peanut butter is associated with a reduced risk of death.

To determine the relationship between peanut intake and mortality risk, researchers analyzed the food intakes of over 200,000 individuals from southeastern United States and Shanghai, China. They found that compared to those with the lowest peanut and peanut butter intake, those with the highest intake experienced a 17-21% reduction in mortality risk, primarily due to reduced risk of death from cardiovascular disease. These results show that consuming peanuts is a great way to increase your lifespan.

While this isn’t the first publication to link nut consumption to reduced risk of mortality, a few factors make this study particularly noteworthy. First, previous studies have primarily utilized individuals of high socioeconomic status and of European descent to study the relationship between nut intake and mortality risk. This is the first study to examine this relationship in a group of predominantly low socioeconomic status Americans, and in Asians. These findings provide powerful evidence that the association of peanut consumption with mortality risk persists across multiple ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

A second factor that makes this study unique is that the participants from Shanghai, China ate peanuts nearly exclusively, with very little tree nut consumption. This allowed researchers to determine the impact of peanuts specifically on mortality risk. Since peanuts are the most sustainable and affordable nut, these findings confirm that peanuts are great for your health, the planet, and your wallet!

Finally, this study is impactful because it demonstrates that the inverse relationship between peanut consumption and mortality risk exists even among high-risk individuals; over 75% of the U.S. participants were overweight or obese, and over 76% exhibited metabolic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and high cholesterol.

“Peanuts can help us to live longer at an affordable price.”

Mitchell Katz, MD

Considering that individuals with metabolic complications have a higher risk of mortality, that peanuts have such a powerful impact on mortality risk in this population has significant clinical and public health implications.

The findings from this study were so compelling that the editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association, Mitchell Katz, MD, published a commentary to highlight their significance, writing that peanuts can “help us to live longer at an affordable price.”

According to the study authors, “consumption of nuts, particularly peanuts given their general affordability, may be considered a cost-effective measure to improve cardiovascular health.” Eat peanuts. Live longer!
While a vast body of evidence supports the health benefits of nut consumption, the study “Prospective evaluation of the association of nut/peanut consumption with total and cause-specific mortality” is particularly noteworthy because it is the first to examine the impact of nut/peanut consumption on total and cause-specific mortality in Americans of African descent.

Previous studies have reported an inverse relationship between nut consumption and mortality. However, these studies have primarily utilized populations of European ancestry and/or of health professionals of high socioeconomic status (SES). Therefore, until recently it was unclear whether the inverse association between nut consumption and mortality risk could be generalized to individuals of other racial/ethnic backgrounds, and to those of low SES, for whom peanuts are the primary nut consumed.

To address this, researchers examined the association between nut/peanut consumption and cause-specific mortality in participants of the Southern Community Cohort Study (SCCS). The SCCS is comprised of 71,764 men and women from 12 southern U.S. states, where the incidence of obesity and chronic diseases are exceedingly high. Most of the SCCS participants are of low SES, and approximately two-thirds are of African descent. Using a research tool called the Food Frequency Questionnaire, researchers assessed the participants’ food intakes over a period of 5.4 years, and found that peanuts accounted for at least 50% of the nuts consumed in this population.

Compared to those with the lowest nut/peanut intake, SCCS participants with the highest nut/peanut intake experienced a 21% reduction in total mortality risk. No difference in mortality risk was observed between blacks and whites, providing evidence that the association of nut/peanut consumption with mortality risk does not vary by ethnicity.

These findings are significant because they demonstrate that peanuts, which are an inexpensive and accessible source of plant protein, can reduce the risk of death even in highly at-risk populations. Over 76% of the SCCS participants had metabolic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol, and over 75% were overweight or obese.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that peanuts are an excellent way to cardiovascular health and promote longevity. Try keeping a jar of peanuts at your desk as a quick and convenient heart-healthy snack.
In addition to being the first to examine the relationship between total and cause-specific mortality in African Americans, the study “Prospective evaluation of the association of nut/peanut consumption with total and cause-specific mortality”\(^1\) is also the first to investigate this relationship in an Asian population.

To determine if the relationship between peanut intake and mortality risk persists in an Asian population, researchers examined the dietary patterns and health records of 61,480 men in the Shanghai Men’s Health Study (SMHS), and of 74,741 women in the Shanghai Women’s Health Study (SWHS). The SMHS and SWHS are population-based studies designed to investigate genetic, biological, and lifestyle factors that are associated with risk of cancer and chronic diseases.

After analyzing food records spanning a period of 6.5 years for men and 12.2 years for women, researchers found that those with the highest peanut intake exhibited a 17% reduction in total mortality risk, compared to those with the lowest peanut intake. The reduction in mortality risk was driven primarily by the reduction in death due to cardiovascular disease.

While the relationship between peanut intake and mortality risk was strikingly similar between the SMHS/SWHS and SCCS populations, several differences exist between these two populations. First, only 33.2% of SMWH/SWHS participants had metabolic conditions, compared to over 75% of the SCCS participants. Further, while peanuts and peanut butter accounted for over 50% of total nut consumption for SCCS participants, the Shanghai participants consumed peanuts almost exclusively.

That the inverse relationship between peanut intake and mortality exists across multiple ethnicities and cultural backgrounds is the most notable strength of this study. Further, because so few women in the SWHS were smokers (2.8%), researchers were able to evaluate the association between peanuts and mortality without the confounding effect of smoking in that population.

Overall, these findings provide powerful evidence that peanuts reduce mortality risk across multiple race, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, independent of metabolic conditions, BMI, and smoking. Try using this nut as a protein source in your stir-fry, soup, or salad, and harness the longevity powers of the peanut!
Live Longer...for Peanuts

The results from this study were so compelling that the deputy editor of JAMA Internal Medicine, Mitchell Katz, MD, published a commentary to highlight their significance. Read more about why these findings are so striking, below.

Multiple studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of eating nuts. Nonetheless, the editors felt it was worth publishing another such study for 2 reasons. First, this study combined 3 cohorts to produce a large and diverse sample, including a predominantly low socioeconomic cohort of Americans and 2 Chinese cohorts. The authors found that higher nut intake was associated with lower mortality in all 3 cohorts. The consistency of the results between the cohorts and with prior studies that have been performed in higher-income populations increases our confidence that the beneficial effects of nuts are not due to other characteristics of nut eaters. Second, in the 2 Asian cohorts, nuts were limited to peanuts because there was very little tree nut consumption in these groups. This is important because peanuts are cheap and ubiquitous (and can be ground into delicious peanut butter!). Of course, peanuts are not really nuts (they are legumes . . . ), but who cares if they help us to live longer at an affordable price.

References