Peanuts and peanut butter have long been favorite foods for many kids growing up, and new research is showing that young girls who consume peanut butter or peanuts at least twice a week decreased their risk of breast disease later in life by up to 39%.1

The study looked at girls aged 9 to 15 who filled out dietary recalls; ten years later, researchers examined which participants had been diagnosed with benign breast disease (BBD) and compared this to their reported dietary intakes. It was found that peanut butter and nuts were more significant than any other food looked at in reducing the risk of BBD. In fact, peanut butter and nuts were so significant, they drove positive results for total vegetable protein intake and total vegetable fat intake, meaning there is something special about peanuts as a source of plant protein and healthy fats. Girls who had a family history of breast cancer had the strongest results, with benefits of peanut butter and peanut intake seen before and after the onset of menses.

Although peanuts are grouped in with all nuts in the study, it is likely peanuts were the driving factor due to the fact that the majority of nuts consumed in the U.S. are peanuts.2 In addition, previous research has shown that women who had at least one serving of peanuts per week decreased their risk of proliferative BBD (P-BBD), by one-third. Results were similar for all nuts, but other nuts required twice the serving amount to have the same effects as peanuts.3 P-BBD is the type of BBD most strongly associated with increased risk of breast cancer.

BBD has shown to be a strong risk factor for breast cancer, comparable to family history, and research continues to show that focusing on prevention at younger ages is critical for reduced risk of disease. Breast development at adolescent years and changes in hormonal environment make adolescence a critical time period for reducing risk of breast cancer with improved dietary choices, such as including peanut butter or peanuts twice a week.

What is BBD?

Benign breast disease refers to noncancerous disorders that can affect the breast in adolescents. Although BBD is not cancer, research indicates BBD, particularly proliferative BBD (P-BBD), is a well-established risk factor as a marker of a proliferative state of the breast that is considered an early indicator that cancer may develop in the breast.4,5

“These findings suggest that peanut butter could help reduce the risk of breast cancer in women,” said Graham Colditz, MD, DrPH, senior author and associate director for cancer prevention and control at Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine.
Scientists and health professionals are moving away from looking at individual nutrients and instead look at whole foods or overall dietary patterns in their relation to health and research continues to show that there is something special about peanuts. Peanuts and peanut butter are packed full of nutrition including many hard to get nutrients, plant-protein, healthy oils, fiber, and many bioactives; all of these components work together to create one special nut that can not only help manage weight, but can significantly reduce the risk of disease in people of all ages.6-9

All you need to get these great benefits is a handful of peanuts or a spoonful of peanut butter once a day, and it shouldn’t be hard to get your daily dose when peanuts are the most affordable nut and a lifelong favorite food.

Peanut Protein

Peanuts contain more protein than any other nut6 and are one of the most commonly consumed plant-proteins in the U.S.2,4 Previous studies have shown that plant based diets are associated with decreased risk of disease including breast, colon, and prostate cancer.10 Newer research shows that cumulative vegetable protein intake, mainly due to peanut butter and peanuts, decreased the risk of BBD in 14-year-old girls.1 Researchers looked at many sources of vegetable proteins including beans, lentils, and soy, and none were significant in reducing risk, except peanut butter and peanuts.

Cancer Fighting Compounds

Peanut butter and peanuts contain compounds called phytosterols.10 Phytosterols are similar in structure to cholesterol, but are not absorbed by the body, allowing them to block the absorption of cholesterol from your diet. In addition to their heart health properties, emerging evidence is showing that they also decrease inflammation and reduce the growth of various cancers including prostate, colon, and breast cancer.10

Phytosterols protect against cancer several ways, including inhibiting cell division, stimulating tumor cell death and modifying some of the hormones that are essential to tumor growth.

Peanuts and peanut butter also contain resveratrol, a compound that has been associated with prolonged life and reduced risk of many diseases, including cancer.12

Did you know

Peanuts are a good source of fiber and vitamin E, which have both shown to protect against breast cancer. In one study high fiber intake was associated with a 25% decreased risk of P-BBD, and vitamin E was shown to have significant protective effects.11
Studies from the Family Lifestyle and Overweight (FLOW) Prevention Program, conducted by Baylor College of Medicine and the United States Department of Agriculture-Agricultural Research Service (USDA/ARS) Children’s Nutrition Research Center in Houston, Texas, have shown that peanut butter and peanuts can improve weight maintenance, decrease cholesterol, and improve nutrient intake in kids and adolescents.13-14 FLOW is an in-school weight management and prevention program focusing on behavioral and dietary changes in kids and adolescents. Adolescence represents a critical time for health intervention and schools are in a unique position to educate students and promote healthy eating behaviors.

According to the CDC, 18.4% of adolescents are classified as obese.15 One of the biggest contributors to overweight and obesity in children and adolescents is increased snacking from high calorie, high carbohydrate, high sugar, and salty snacks. Alone, snacking accounts for almost 25% of daily calories for the average individual, with 40% of people reporting 3-4 snacks per day. In addition, increased snacking interferes with meal intake, specifically breakfast and lunch among children.16-18 In the FLOW studies, children often skipped school meals, only eating the low nutrient, high calorie, afternoon snacks often provided at the school. Researchers offered peanuts and peanut butter as a healthy alternative and kids were not only receptive to the change, but adolescents who ate peanuts had lower zBMIs, higher nutrient intakes, increased vegetable intake, lower total cholesterol, and were less hungry throughout the day.13-14 Peanuts also had an effect on long-term weight maintenance. Kids who ate peanuts as an after school snack not only lost more weight than kids who did not, but also maintained weight loss for up to two years later.13

“…adolescents who ate peanuts had lower zBMIs, higher nutrient intakes, increased vegetable intake, lower total cholesterol, and were less hungry throughout the day.”12-14

Peanut Butter: The Perfect Veggie Dip.

Pairing vegetables with a tasty dip is a common practice among caretakers to get kids to eat more vegetables, but the quality of the dip can play a major role in improving overall nutrient intake. Research shows that kids who dip their vegetables in peanut butter actually consume more vegetables and increased the variety of vegetables eaten.11 This was seen even in “vegetable resistant” children. In addition, a new study shows that salad dressings were not associated with decreased risk of BBD, whereas peanut butter was.1 Pairing vegetables with a nutrient-rich dip like peanut butter instead of salad dressing is an effective, simple strategy for children and adolescents that helps build positive eating habits, increases vegetable intake, and may contribute to healthier lifestyles and chronic disease reduction.
KID-FRIENDLY PEANUT BUTTER & BANANA ROLL UPS

Ingredients

- 1 banana, peeled
- 2 Tbs peanut butter
- 1 whole wheat tortilla

Preparation

1. Place tortilla on a flat surface and spread 2 tbsp of peanut butter to evenly coat.
2. Place the banana near the edge of the tortilla and roll it up.
3. Slice into 1/2 inch rounds and serve.

*Try adding other fruits or jam for a variety of flavors.

References

20. NFCS 1977-78, WVEIA, NHANES 2005-06, WVEIA, 2009-10 WWIEA, NHANES, 1 day, 9-12 year olds.

The Peanut Institute is a non-profit organization that supports nutrition research and develops educational programs to encourage healthy lifestyles.

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