A Decade of Discovery About Peanuts

Interview With the Experts:
Highlights of What We Know Now Through Sound Science

What do we understand about eating peanuts now that we did not understand ten years ago?

Dr. Willett: During the 1990s, the general advice from the nutrition community and the medical community was to eliminate fats as much as possible from our diets -- fats of all kinds. But what we have learned is that some fats, in particular unsaturated fats that come from nuts, actually reduce blood cholesterol levels. And, in our long term epidemiological studies we see that those types of fats actually reduce risk of heart attacks and type 2 diabetes.

Can fat in peanuts make us fat if we eat them?

Dr. Willett: There has been a lot of concern that eating foods high in fat, like peanuts, would actually make us fat. But the interesting thing is that the percentage of fat in our diet is not really related to our risk of obesity or weight gain. That means that we can have those healthy fats in our diet, ideally substituting for unhealthy fats -- and reduce our heart disease risk and not gain weight at the same time.

Dr. Walter Willett, MD, DrPH, is Professor of Epidemiology and Nutrition and Chairman of the Department of Nutrition at Harvard School of Public Health and Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Willett has focused much of his work over the last 25 years studying the effects of diet on the occurrence of major diseases.
In your research, what effect does eating peanuts have on chronic disease?

**Dr. Willett:** Our large long term studies found that people eating nuts on a regular basis -- 5 times or more per week -- actually had reduced risk of heart disease, reduced risk of diabetes, and actually tended to weigh less than people who rarely ate nuts. That almost came as a surprise, but it has been seen in our study and in every other study that has looked at that as well.

**Does the type of fat eaten make a difference?**

**Dr. Willett:** The type of fat in the diet is really one of the most important factors that increases the risk of heart disease. What we have seen is that saturated fats do increase risk of heart attack a bit. Even more importantly, trans fats in the diet from partially hydrogenated vegetable oils dramatically increase our risks of heat disease and diabetes. So, if we replace those bad fats -- the trans fats and the saturated fats -- with vegetable fats, including peanuts, peanut oil, and all the vegetable oils, it will actually substantially reduce our risk of heart attack.

**A peanut butter sandwich tastes like a treat, should I feel guilty about eating one, or about serving it to my kids?**

**Dr. Willett:** For a while there was concern that a peanut butter sandwich might be an unhealthy thing to send off with your kids to school or to take to work yourself. Actually, from everything we see... having a peanut butter sandwich on whole grain fiber bread is one of the healthiest meals you can possibly have.
What have you learned about peanuts over the past ten years?

Ms. McManus: We’ve learned a lot. Specifically that we know that peanuts do reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes, and they also help in weight loss and maintenance of that lost weight. I think that some of the other areas that we’ve started to study more are some of the mechanistic issues around what peanuts actually do. I think there’s still some study that needs to be done, but we’ve had an exciting ten years learning the benefits of peanuts and health.

Will eating fat make you fat?

Ms. McManus: At Harvard School of Public Health we did one of the pioneer studies in weight loss and what we looked at was that a moderate fat Mediterranean style diet help support weight loss over the long term. We compared it to a low fat diet, which everyone was using as their prescription to lose weight. But, we were able to show within 18 months, that the people that were consuming the moderate fat -- the Mediterranean style diet -- had greater participation rates and also lost more weight than those on the low fat diet. We learned that when people could incorporate healthy, higher fat foods into their diet they were more satisfied, they really enjoyed the variety, and they were able to really savor the types of foods they were choosing.

What types of foods did dieters choose and did it make a nutritional difference?

Ms. McManus: Some of the foods that were incorporated were peanut butter -- number one. That was a favorite of most people. Another food was certainly peanuts as a healthful snack. We encouraged people to use these types of foods on a daily basis in a portion controlled amount so that they could truly enjoy and savor these foods and still lose weight. People also ate more vegetables when they could cook with or use healthy oils in salads.
What do we know about peanuts that we did not know ten years ago?

Dr. Mattes: Ten years ago we thought peanuts were going to be problematic for weight gain because they’re high fat and as a result they would lead to passive over consumption of more calories because we eat a certain weight or volume of food. But the science now clearly refutes that. Peanuts have a very high satiety value. That is, after eating a meal that includes peanuts or eating peanuts alone, hunger is decreased markedly and the explanation for that is only now becoming apparent, but it appears it is due to a mixture the components of the nut. Probably, a role is played by fiber, the protein, the crunch of the nut, and perhaps other factors that we have not identified.

The data now show that including peanuts in the diet does not promote positive energy balance. That is, taking in more calories than are necessary to maintain body weight. And so, the body weight of individuals that consume peanuts on a regular basis is either unchanged or in fact lower. This may be due, in part, because of the high satiety value, and in part, because the energy of the peanut is not fully absorbed, not fully available to the body.”

How does satiety make a difference?

Dr. Mattes: It would make sense, if we are going to intervene to try to reduce the threat to weight gain, that we would focus on those eating events, the ones occurring mid afternoon and early evening, and substituting a food that has high satiety value for one that has lesser satiety value. This helps curb appetite and excess intake. For example, the inclusion of peanuts in the early afternoon or evening would be a very useful strategy.

Peanuts are a unique package of nutrients and attributes that act synergistically to curb hunger.
How have government recommendations changed concerning the AMOUNT and TYPE of fat in the diet?

For the first time in 25 years, the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans have allowed fat intake to increase up to 35% of calories, so long as it is the right type of fat. In addition, for the first time, the government put a lower limit of 20% of calories from fat because fat intake is required for adequate absorption of fat soluble nutrients such as vitamin E, which many Americans are lacking.

The recommendations say to limit the “bad” fats. Keep saturated fat under 10% of calories and trans fat as low as possible. Emphasize “good” unsaturated fats. Polyunsaturated fats should be 5-10% of calories and monounsaturated fats should make up the remainder of the daily fat intake.

What are the “good” fats and where are they found?

The “good” fats are the unsaturated, mono- and polyunsaturated fats. The guidelines state that we should get most of our fat sources coming from polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids, such as fish, nuts (like peanuts), and vegetable oils.

How do peanuts fall in line with Government health recommendations?

Peanut products provide a healthy balance of mono- and polyunsaturated fat, they are full of taste AND easy to substitute for “bad” fats in the diet. Research has shown that eating peanut products daily can reduce the risk of heart disease.

Dr. Penny Kris-Etherton, PhD, RD, is currently Distinguished Professor at Pennsylvania State University Department of Nutrition. Dr. Kris-Etherton was the Dietary Fats Committee Chair to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines, Scientific Advisory Committee, served on the National Academies Panel on Macronutrients, and on the American Heart Association Nutrition Committee. She is an expert on how lipids affect emerging risk factors for cardiovascular disease.

What have learned about peanuts over the past ten years?

Dr. Awad: We know more about cancer in relation to phytosterols and that peanuts are a good source of phytosterols. The connection between phytosterols and cardiovascular disease as well as cancer is now well known. We think that when people eat peanuts they provide the phytosterols that give this protection for those two main common diseases.

Atif Awad, PhD, RD is the Associate Professor of Nutrition and Biochemistry at SUNY at Buffalo where he newly established a graduate program in nutrition. He is a world expert on antioxidants, particularly phytosterols and their role in cancer and cardiovascular disease.

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What have you learned about peanuts over the past ten years?

Dr. Champagne: During these last ten years, the more I have studied peanuts myself, I have realized that peanuts offer so many more health benefits over and above the mono unsaturated fat.

What did you see when you analyzed the effects of making small substitutions at breakfast and lunch?

Dr. Champagne: When I actually looked at small substitutions of peanut butter for other sources of spreads. I saw a significant reduction in saturated fat and an increase in good fats, monounsaturated fats and some increase in polyunsaturated fats. Over and above that, I saw that there’s a positive health benefit in terms of vitamins and minerals that you would not get with things that were high fat spreads like butter or cream cheese.

What advice can you give to people concerning their diets?

Dr. Champagne: It’s the small changes that enable people to be successful in making changes in their life. They don’t want to just cut out everything, but if they can make small substitutions they will probably have positive health benefits in a very short period of time.

Further Reading


