The Nutritional Health Facts of Cashews

By Kate Meyers

Cashew nuts, a richly sweet product of the cashew tree, have gained popularity in North America and Europe not only for their succulent flavour but for health benefits, too. Whether roasted, salted, sugared or covered in chocolate, the cashew nut, often used as a flavourful complement to appetizers, main dishes and deserts, packs a mix of nutrients and minerals not found in many common foods.

Cashew nuts, native to equatorial South America, are actually seeds, found growing on the end of the cashew apple, an edible and nutrient rich South American treat that is too fragile to export to North America or Europe.

Also known by the botanical name Anacardium occidentale, the cashew is a close relative of mangos, pistachios, poison ivy and poison oak. It was first introduced on a worldwide scale by Portuguese explorers in South America in the 16th century, but international trade didn't take off until the 1920s.

Sometimes called “nature's vitamin pill,” cashew nuts, which now rank #1 among nut crops in the world with 4.1 billion pounds produced in 2002, have been used to promote wellness for centuries.

Medical Benefits

The cashew tree's leaves and bark as well as the popular cashew apple possess herbal health benefits that include killing bacteria and germs, stopping diarrhoea, drying secretions, increasing the libido, and reducing fever, blood sugar, blood pressure and body temperature, but unfortunately the by-products of these parts of the cashew tree are not available in North America and Europe, mainly due to their highly perishable qualities.

The cashew nut, a popular treat found on grocery and health food store shelves across the world, is jam-packed with nutritional content. It packs 5 grams of protein per ounce and high levels of the essential minerals iron, magnesium, phosphorus, zinc, copper and manganese, which are utilized in holistic health solutions and healthy diets.

Diet and Weight Management

Cashew nuts do have a relatively high fat content (12 grams per ounce, 2 grams saturated fat), but it is considered “good fat.” This is due to the agreeable fat ratio in the nut, 1:2:1 for saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated, respectively, which scientists say is the ideal ratio for optimal health.
Cashew nuts also have a fatty acid profile that contributes to good health through phytosterols, tocopherols, and squalene, all of which lower the risk of heart disease, combined with the nut's zero percent cholesterol content.

Even with the relatively high fat content, cashew nuts are considered to be a “low-fat” nut. In fact, cashew nuts contain less fat per serving than many other popular nuts commonly found in grocery stores and health food stores, including almonds, walnuts, peanuts and pecans.

Recommendations vary for cashew nut consumption in diet and weight loss. Cashew nuts have a high energy density and high amount of dietary fiber, both which have been attributed to a beneficial effect on weight management, but only when eaten in moderation.

**Cardiovascular and Circulatory Health**

With no cholesterol, a rarity for such a tasty and pleasing treat, cashew nuts are a healthy fat food for heart patients. And because of their high levels of monounsaturated fatty acids, they also help support healthy levels of low good (HDL) cholesterol.

**Magnesium**

The cashew nut's high magnesium content also takes the credit for its healthy heart qualities. In their raw form, cashews contain 82.5 milligrams of magnesium per ounce, or 21 percent of the daily recommended value of the heart healthy mineral, which also protects against high blood pressure, muscle spasms, migraine headaches, tension, soreness and fatigue.

Magnesium also works with calcium to support healthy muscles and bones in the human body.

**Antioxidants**

And with a high copper content, too, cashew nut consumption helps the body utilize iron, eliminate free radicals, develop bone and connective tissue, and produce the skin and hair pigment melanin.

Copper, which is an essential component of the enzyme superoxide dismutase, is vital in energy production and antioxidant defense, producing greater flexibility in blood vessels, bones and joints.

**Diabetes**
Recent clinical trials have shown that cashews and other nuts work with a person's lipid profile to have a beneficial effect on those with diabetes or at risk for diabetes.

And with 37.7 percent of the daily recommended value of monounsaturated fats, cashews can reduce triglyceride levels in diabetics, protecting them from further complications.

Integrating frequent nut consumption into your diet, especially raw cashews, may lower the risk of developing Type 2 Diabetes, the most commonly diagnosed form of diabetes in America today.

**Gallstones**

All nuts, including the cashew nut, have been associated with a reduced risk of gallstone disease.

According to the Nurses' Health Study, looking at the dietary data of 80,718 women, integrating at least one ounce of nuts a week, such as cashews, gives women a 25 percent lower risk of developing gallstones.

**Dental Health**

Research has also shown that chemicals in cashew nuts kill gram positive bacteria, a pervasive mouth affliction that causes tooth decay, acne, tuberculosis and leprosy.

Eating cashew nuts at moderate levels, some say, can eliminate abscessed teeth, though this has not been proven yet by proper clinical trials.

**Topical Uses**

While the cashew nut is most enjoyed when eaten, it also possesses astringent qualities that are now used in topical creams and gels.

A Philippine scientist who has made a career out of studying the health benefits of cashew nut extract markets the extract in a cream for warts, moles and other skin growths.

The Philippine-produced cream is also reportedly effective on basal cell carcinoma, the most common type of skin cancer, though this too is not yet available in the U.S.

**Ensure Freshness**
Always check your cashews for freshness before you dig in. While cashews have a high amount of the stabilizing oleic acid, a monounsaturated fatty acid, they should always be stored in a tightly sealed container in a cool, dry place.

And don't eat too many at once. Because of their high fat content, over consumption of cashew nuts can cause unwanted weight gain in individuals. The oxalates in cashews cal also become concentrated in body fluids, crystallizing and causing health problems in people with preexisting kidney or gallbladder problems.

With cashew nuts, moderation is key in reaping the health and flavor benefits of nature's treat.

Article Bibliography

More Cashew Nutritional Information:

Cashew nuts are beneficial for your health as they contain Heart-Protective Monounsaturated Fats, Copper, and Magnesium

A quarter-cup of cashew nuts supplies:

- 37.4% of the daily recommended value of monounsaturated fat
- 38.0% of the daily recommended value for copper
- 22.3% of the daily recommended value for magnesium

Cashew Nuts Contain Heart-Protective Monounsaturated Fats

- Cashews have a lower fat content than most other nuts
- Cashews contain primarily unsaturated fatty acids, 75% of which is oleic acid, the same heart-healthy monounsaturated fat found in olive oil
- Oleic acid found in Cashews promotes good cardiovascular health
- Monounsaturated fats reduce high triglyceride levels which are associated with increased risk for heart disease

Eating cashews provides the body with a good source of Copper

Copper plays a role in a wide range of physiological processes including:

- Iron utilization
- Elimination of free radicals
- Development of bone and connective tissue
- Production of the skin and hair pigment called melanin
- Energy production
- Antioxidant defenses

Inadequate intake of copper can lead to health problems such as:

- Iron deficiency anemia
- Ruptured blood vessels
- Osteoporosis
- Joint problems such as rheumatoid arthritis
- Brain disturbances
- Elevated LDL (bad) cholesterol and reduced HDL (good) cholesterol levels
- Irregular heartbeat
- Increased susceptibility to infections

**Cashews are a great source of Magnesium**

**Adequate levels of Magnesium in the body:**

- Ensures healthy bones
- Helps lowers blood pressure
- Prevents heart attacks
- Promotes normal sleep patterns menopausal women
- Reduces the severity of asthma

**Insufficient magnesium can contribute to:**

- High blood pressure
- Muscle spasms Migraine headaches
- Muscle cramps
- Tension
- Soreness
- Fatigue