

Real Foods That Heal



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Walnuts: going nuts may decrease dementia risk

This week, we continue to examine the role of nutrition in reducing the risk of Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia in later life. This is an area with a great deal of uncertainty and controversy, and the one thing that is most clear is that more research is needed to arrive at definite conclusions. However, as I have emphasized before, when I recommend a whole food as a dietary preventive strategy for disease, I can do so confidently based on only limited evidence because the risk is so low and the "good side effects" are so well known.

In that light, I present for your consideration the lowly walnut as a potential candidate for reduction of dementia risk. Walnuts qualify for this role based on their high omega-3 fatty acid content. A handful of walnuts (14 halves, or about one ounce) delivers 2.5 grams of omega-3's. A technicality you should be aware of: the primary omega-3 in this vegetable source is linolenic acid, which humans convert inefficiently to DHA and EPA (only about 15%), the essential fats most needed for cardiovascular and brain health. The other significant nutritional component of walnuts for this discussion is their content of phytosterols, mostly beta-sitosterol, which has cholesterol lowering benefits. On the possible downside if you are concerned about your weight: that handful of walnuts provides you with 185 calories, but that's less than the soda you were thinking about, and if you eat those walnuts instead of some sweet snack food that comes in a wrapper you are definitely better off!

Now that we know walnuts are a good source of omega-3's and phytosterols, let's review how that relates to reducing Alzheimer's risk. As I understand the current scientific literature on nutritional reduction of Alzheimer's risk, there are two major pathways to getting to our destination. One is via reducing inflammation in the brain, knowing that inflammation is always involved in this and other degenerative brain diseases (like Parkinson's and ALS). The other pathway is more indirect but still very important: anything that reduces cardiovascular risk factors reduces risk of Alzheimer's and other dementia, because any size stroke (even small ones that may not have been detected at the time they occurred) adds to the risk of dementia and probably hastens the progression of Alzheimer's if it already exists. So do walnuts qualify on both these paths? Absolutely. Increasing omega-3 fatty acids is probably the single most important diet measure you can take to decrease inflammation. Omega-3's have now an enormous scientific literature documenting their importance in

reducing risk of cardiovascular disease, and the phytosterols help to lower cholesterol.

At this moment I need to ask you specifically to resist the temptation to go online and order a couple of bottles of omega-3's and beta-sitosterol. Please go for the walnuts instead (unless you are allergic to them). My earnest hope is that the handful of walnuts will replace some other snack food in your diet (hopefully getting rid of a snack food with a list of ingredients). And that is its other great value, putting a low-carbohydrate/healthy fat/satisfying and filling snack in the place of some empty calories is a definite "win" for you.

And finally, I guess you noticed that the walnut half looks sort of like... well... a brain. Coincidence? Hmmmm....

Walnut serving suggestions:

I am resisting the temptation to find some fancy recipe for walnuts, but will instead share some simple ways that I enjoy them on a regular basis, to make it easy for you to incorporate them into your routine. Keep a bag in the freezer, it keeps them from going rancid in the pantry. I often sprinkle them on my oatmeal in the morning. We add them to vegetable stir fries for a nutty crunch. For a healthy desert treat, I may have a few walnuts side to side with a piece of really dark chocolate (at least 70% cocoa content, a great antioxidant). Use your own creativity and personal tastes to find ways to enjoy walnuts regularly. Enjoy!

And remember, someone you know needs this information so that they can also benefit from the healing powers of foods. Please forward this bulletin to them by using the link below.

To your health,

Robert Pendergrast, M.D.

www.realfoodsthatheal.com

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