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# Pecan Nutrition Benefits the Hearth, Brain, Bones & More

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# PECAN

Nutrition Benefits the Heart, Brain & More



**Dr. Axe**  
FOOD IS MEDICINE

The savory taste of the pecan is worth a lot more than a delicious pie from grandma – this nut may help you stay healthy for a long time thanks to the wonders of pecan nutrition.

Pecan trees grow fiercely large and provide many of these scrumptious treats that have been shown to aid in weight loss, protect the body from diseases like **atherosclerosis** (hardening and narrowing of the arteries) and diabetes, and even improve brain health.

Although many people claim that a low-fat diet is the best way to live a healthy lifestyle, the healthy fats of pecan nutrition are powerful in the production of antioxidants, reduction of inflammation and simply provide a great-tasting addition to almost any dish.

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## Benefits of Pecan Nutrition

### 1. Helps Maintain High Energy and Lose Weight

Contrary to what many popular figures may tell you, eating a diet low in dietary fat is actually not very beneficial to you at all. One reason for this is the way a diet high in fat helps keep you feeling full, but the complex answer is even more encouraging. For example, healthy fats (like those found in pecan nutrition) impact the **ghrelin** hormone, which is a vital part of weight maintenance. High levels of ghrelin in the brain are associated with elevated stress levels and a constant feeling of the “munchies,” or the desire to eat a lot. (1)

In addition to its standing as a food high in healthy fats, pecan nutrition contains more than half the daily required amount of manganese, which is useful in a variety of ways, including in **weight loss efforts**. While it's not completely clear why, manganese, especially combined with other supportive nutrients, helps reduce the weight in obese or overweight men and women.

One such supportive nutrient is copper, also found in significant quantities in pecan nutrition. Copper is essential in more than 50 different metabolic enzyme reactions necessary for maintaining a fast metabolism, and in the creation of adenosine triphosphate (ATP), the body's source of energy.

Copper isn't the only necessary nutrient for the production of ATP. Your body also needs other nutrients to complete this task, including thiamine, also known as vitamin B1. Thiamine not only helps boost energy levels in ATP production, but also in the process of red blood cell production, which your body uses as energy fuel, too.

## **2. Prevents Oxidative Stress**

Pecans, like many other foods rich in healthy fats, boast a very high antioxidant load. Because so many environmental and dietary issues promote oxidative damage within your body, it's important to eat **high antioxidant foods** to counteract this damage. Damage due to oxidative stress is commonly paired with high incidence rates of cancers, heart disease and many other diseases in which cells mutate.

A study out of Loma Linda University in California found that eating pecans acutely increased the antioxidants in the bloodstream in the 24 hours after consumption. (2) These effects tend to build on one another, just like the opposite is true of free radicals building in the body, so pecans can be a helpful addition to a diet high in antioxidants.

Another study examined the effect of nut consumption, including that of pecans, and how it related to the formation of degenerative diseases. People who ate more nuts per week had notably lower instances of some common and often fatal diseases. (3)

In an assessment of the specific antioxidant loads of different nuts, pecan nutrition came in especially high in phenols, proanthocyanidins, hydrolysable tannins, **flavonoids** and phenolic acids. (4)

### 3. Contributes to a Healthy Heart

Due in large part to its plentiful list of antioxidants, pecan nutrition is a key ingredient in a diet for a healthy heart.

Pecans and other tree nuts have been known to **reduce systolic blood pressure** in patients without diabetes. They can be considered part of the high-fat **Mediterranean diet** that has long been known to significantly reduce blood pressure across the board, as well as decrease overall cardiac-related deaths. (5)

Another Loma Linda University study found that diets high in pecans were related to a reduction in “serum lipids,” or the amount of fat in the bloodstream. This is an indicator of risk and occurrence of high cholesterol. The scientists conducting this study specifically recommend a diet high in **monounsaturated fat** for those who are at risk for high cholesterol and other heart-related conditions. (6) This is why nuts like pecans are considered **cholesterol-lowering foods**.

Like I mentioned above, consistent nut consumption reduces many degenerative diseases, most specifically heart disease. In addition, the thiamine in pecans helps to improve heart function. (7)

### 4. Reduces Inflammation

Many functions in the body rely on a proper amount of inflammation as the body’s defense against damaged cells. However, chronic **inflammation**, when the body is no longer able to keep it under control, is at the root of most diseases as it leads to cell mutation and undue stress on various parts of functional systems.

While inflammation, reducing inflammation, the role of antioxidants and the processes that affect these conditions are extremely complicated, there are many parts of the puzzle that we can affect in small ways. For example, it’s understood that **superoxide dismutase**, an enzyme that

controls the distribution of the superoxide radical, has a large part to play in inflammation and protection from oxidative stress. Superoxide dismutase production and function are important for a lowered risk of heart disease, as well as helping reduce inflammation in conditions like arthritis.

One of the forms of superoxide dismutase, or “SOD,” relies greatly on the high presence of manganese to operate, meaning pecans can help fulfill the manganese requirement necessary for this form of SOD.

The copper in pecans also contributes to its anti-inflammatory properties, especially for pain and stiffness common in arthritis. This is why pecan nutrition and other nutrients from **anti-inflammatory foods** make great additions to an **arthritis diet** treatment plan.

## **5. May Prevent Osteoporosis-Related Bone Loss in Women**

In conjunction with other nutrients, manganese, copper and zinc (all found in pecan nutrition) have been used to help treat symptoms of **osteoporosis**. Early research has found these nutrients to be particularly helpful when treating women suffering bone loss by helping increase bone mass and decrease bone loss. (8)

## **6. Helps Improve and Maintain Peak Brain Function**

Many of the minerals found in pecans contribute to the proper functioning of the brain. Thiamine is given to patients with **Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome**, a brain disorder common in alcoholics due to **thiamine deficiency**, which afflicts between 30 percent and 80 percent of people who abuse alcohol. (9)

Copper is another nutrient necessary for good brain function, as it impacts brain pathways involving dopamine and galactose. It also helps stop **free radical damage** from occurring in the brain that contributes to degenerative damage and diseases like Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s.

The brain's synaptic processes also depend on manganese, which is crucial for quick reactions and brain signaling. Deficiencies in manganese are closely related to mood problems, trouble focusing, learning disabilities, mental illness and possibly epilepsy. (10) Given all these compounds are provided by pecan nutrition, it's no surprise pecans and other nuts are considered **brain foods**.

## 7. Can Reduce Symptoms of PMS

The presence of manganese is another benefit from eating pecans if you desire to reduce **PMS symptoms**, such as mood swings and cramps. Dietary manganese, when consumed with calcium, seems to have significant impact on these PMS symptoms. (11)

## 8. Helps in Treatment of Diabetes

Although research in this area is minimal at this point, there are early findings that suggest supplementing your diet with manganese-rich foods, like pecans, can help in the management of **diabetes symptoms**. Higher manganese levels are associated with better insulin secretion and increased glucose tolerance. (12)

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## Pecan Nutrition Facts

Pecans grow on lush, green trees in the Southeastern/South Central regions of the United States as well as Mexico. This North American nut variety, *Carya illinoensis*, has been cultivated for several centuries and is, surprisingly, not technically a nut at all. Pecans, like the other nuts in the

hickory family, are botanically a fruit cultivar known as a “drupe,” or “stone fruit.” Drupes contain a small seed on the inside, a shell of some kind surrounding the seed and an outer “fleshy” component.

The variety available in pecan nutrition is quite impressive, boasting 11 essential vitamins and nutrients in one small serving. Pecans are high in fat, but not to worry — these are **healthy fats** that help your body in a large number of ways, including maintaining healthy weight and good heart function. (If you’re worried about the fat content, remember that there are several **low-fat diet risks** if you don’t consume any health fats.)

In addition to good, healthy fats, pecans also offer several minerals that serve as protection against dangerous mineral deficiencies, the symptoms of which can range from anemia to a risk of brain diseases.

A one-ounce serving of pecans (about 28 grams) contains about: (13)

- 193 calories
- 3.9 grams carbohydrates
- 2.6 grams protein
- 20.2 grams fat
- 2.7 grams fiber
- 1.3 milligrams **manganese** (63 percent DV)
- 0.3 milligram **copper** (17 percent DV)
- 0.2 milligram thiamine (12 percent DV)
- 33.9 milligrams magnesium (8 percent DV)
- 1.3 milligrams zinc (8 percent DV)
- 77.5 milligrams phosphorus (8 percent DV)
- 0.7 milligram iron (4 percent DV)
- 0.1 milligram vitamin B6 (3 percent DV)
- 115 milligrams potassium (3 percent DV)

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## How to Select and Cook Pecans

When selecting your pecans, it's best to look for nuts uniform in size and feel heavy. Many people choose to purchase only deshelled pecans, reducing the amount of work involved in using them for cooking. However, if you're of the variety who desire the freshest-tasting nuts you can find, you may be interested in buying pecans still in their shells and learning how to properly shell pecans yourself.

The beauty of these drupes is that they don't have to be cooked in order to eat, but they're delicious when prepared in almost any method. Some recipes call for you to first toast pecans before adding them to your dish, which gives them a slightly richer flavor. But be careful — they scorch easily and must be watched with a careful eye. Here's how to toast pecans:

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.
- Lightly spritz baking sheet with cooking spray.
- To toast pecans, put them on a baking sheet and toast them just until they become aromatic, about five minutes.
- Reminder: You have to watch them carefully as they are easily scorched.

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## **Pecan Recipes**

Like I said, one of my favorite things about pecans is the vast variety of ways they can add colorful flavor to your dishes. If you're looking for a creative snack to take on the go, I recommend trying out my **Pecan Coconut Balls**.

For an entree high in omega-3s and other major antioxidants, you'll really enjoy this **Pecan Pesto Salmon** recipe. It has just the right amount of savory punch to complement the tart aroma of salmon.

And what would a discussion on pecan nutrition be if I failed to mention a delicious **Pecan Pie**? The best part about this recipe is that it's completely gluten-free and doesn't contain any refined sugar, so you can eat it without worrying about how it will make you feel later.

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## **Pecan History and Interesting Facts**

Pecans first came on the food scene in Native American history around the year 1500, its name originating from the Algonquins. The word "pecan" actually means "a nut that requires a stone to crack." (14)

Colonists in North America celebrated pecan tree plantings as early as the 1600s, with the first recorded pecan planting in the U.S. documented in 1772. In the beginning of the 17th century, the French recognized the financial potential of exporting this delicious treat and began sending crops to the West Indies.

Since then, pecans have been an important and common food in American culture, finding their way into recipes from everything from salads to desserts. Texans are especially fond of it, as they named the pecan tree as their state tree in 1919.

The "correct" pronunciation of the word pecan is a much-debated topic, although there is not technically a "right" way to say it. Most commonly within the U.S., you'll hear the "a" spoken with a long sound, like in the word "father." However, in Great Britain and certain regions of the United States, pecan lovers insist on a short "a" sound, like in "bad." Regardless of whichever you prefer, they're still just as delicious.

Oh, and July 12 is recognized as National Pecan Pie Day — and that's a cause I think we can all get behind. (15)

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## Potential Side Effects/Caution of Pecan Nutrition

As is the case with many nut cultivars, it's possible to suffer from a pecan allergy. The most common symptoms occur within the first hour after consuming pecans and can range anywhere from hives and swelling to vomiting and loss of consciousness.

If you suspect you or your child may have an allergy to pecans, it's important to get tested at an allergist before trying them. Anytime you believe you may be experiencing an allergic reaction to pecans, you should immediately discontinue eating them and consult a physician.

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## Final Thoughts on Pecan Nutrition

- Pecans boast 11 vital nutrients that are useful in many processes within the body.
- Although they're high in fat, pecans are part of a healthy, high-fat diet high in antioxidants.
- You can eat pecans in order to decrease your risk of heart disease, increase energy levels and improve brain function, among other striking benefits.
- Some of the nutrients found in large amounts in pecans are manganese, copper and zinc, which play an important role in reducing inflammation, brain health and even the symptoms of PMS.
- Pecans have been cultivated since the 1500s by Native Americans and are produced exclusively in Mexico and the United States.

## Read Next: 9 Amazing Benefits of Almonds Nutrition

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