

The Mighty Peanut

This week's column, **The Mighty Peanut**, comes from Dr. Robert Keith, Alabama Cooperative Extension System nutrition and health specialist and Auburn University professor of nutrition and food science.

Researchers once again have underscored what George Washington Carver first discovered a long time ago — that the humble peanut is a nutritional powerhouse chock-full of a number of phytochemicals and essential vitamins and minerals.

Alabama A&M University researchers not only have reinforced the nutritional potency of peanuts but also demonstrated that boiling is the best way to release important phytochemicals, which have been shown to protect us against several chronic diseases.

The research, published in the American Chemical Society's Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry, was coauthored by Lloyd Walker, chair of Alabama A&M University's Department of Food and Animal Sciences, and fellow A&M researchers Yvonne Chukwumah and Martha Verghese. Bernhard Vogler, a researcher at the University of Alabama-Huntsville, also assisted in the study.

Yes, the phytochemical punch associated with peanuts is indeed impressive, especially considering the types of phytochemicals found in peanuts. At the top of the list is resveratrol, a compound found in red wine and one of the reasons why wine is considered a potent safeguard against cardiac disease.

Granted, the amount found in peanuts isn't as high as what is found in wine, but it is one of the major phytochemicals found in peanuts. Add to that list another major phytochemical, beta-sitosterol, a compound that has been shown to lower cholesterol and may provide some protection against certain forms of cancer.

Yet, it's not only the phytochemical value of peanuts that impresses researchers. Peanuts also are a rich source of protein — in fact, a richer source than most other nuts. It's also a source of dietary fiber — and not a bad one at that, according to researchers. Add to that nutritional list vitamins E and niacin as well as magnesium, an essential mineral.

Peanuts also are high in monounsaturated fat, the so-called healthy fat — the same heart-healthy fat found in another highly regarded product, olive oil.

Indeed, because of peanuts' heart-healthy phytochemicals and nutrients, they have several of the attributes associated with the Mediterranean Diet, a pattern of eating that has been closely linked with lower rates of heart disease.

Even so, while peanuts should be consumed as an integral part of a healthy diet, researchers caution against getting too carried away. While the type of fat associated with peanuts—monounsaturated—is widely preferred over saturated fat, it can promote obesity if consumed in excessive amounts.

Aside from their high fat content, peanuts also contain minute amounts of aflatoxin, a substance that, if consumed in excessive amounts over long periods of time, possibly can cause liver damage and increase one's cancer risk.

In this respect, peanuts are a lot like red wine: A moderate amount of peanuts can be part of a healthy diet by protecting against heart disease and possibly even certain forms of cancer. But again, just be sure to practice moderation.

Matthew Hartzell, County Extension Coordinator
Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Bibb County Extension Office
Phone: 205-926-3117 Fax: 205-926-5114