

Eating for the Future: How Nuts Support Healthy Aging



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How can we reach age 70 —or even 75— still physically active, mentally sharp, and free from chronic disease? Recent findings offer one compelling answer: adopting a long-term diet rich in fruits, legumes, vegetables, whole grains... and yes, nuts.

As global populations age at an unprecedented pace, the central question is no longer just how to live more years, but especially how to age better. A recent study¹ published in *Nature Medicine* sheds new light on this issue. Its findings suggest that dietary patterns emphasizing plant-based foods, including nuts, significantly increase the chances of aging in good health.

Nuts and Healthy Aging: A Natural Alliance

Healthy aging, as redefined by the World Health Organization, goes beyond simply avoiding disease. It includes maintaining physical, mental, and cognitive function, and preserving the ability to live independently and enjoy life.

The aforementioned study followed over 100,000 US health professionals for up to 30 years, evaluating not just survival, but quality of life in older age. The results were striking: only 9.3% of participants reached age 70 without chronic diseases and with preserved cognitive, physical, and mental health. However, those who adhered closely to healthy dietary patterns —such as the Alternative Healthy Eating Index (AHEI), the Mediterranean diet, or Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH)— were up to 86% more likely to achieve healthy aging. And among the key dietary components? Nuts.

“Healthy aging begins with today’s food choices. A handful of nuts might just be a handful of health.”

Why Nuts Matter

Nuts emerged as one of the strongest individual food contributors to healthy aging. Regular consumption was associated with improved cognitive function, better mental wellbeing, reduced risk of chronic disease, and increased likelihood of reaching age 70 in good health.

Nuts are nutrient powerhouses. They offer unsaturated fats, fiber, antioxidants, vitamin E, plant protein, and a variety of bioactive compounds. These nutrients are known to reduce inflammation and oxidative stress, support cardiovascular health, and potentially protect against neurodegenerative conditions. When included as part of an overall healthy diet, their benefits extend well beyond heart health. In fact, emerging research suggests that certain nuts may offer neuroprotective effects particularly relevant to aging brains, including reduced cognitive decline and improved memory performance.



Different Dietary Patterns, Shared Principles

The study examined eight different dietary scores, but they all share a common foundation: high intake of plant foods (fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, nuts), healthy fats, and low consumption of ultra-processed products, as well as foods rich in sodium and added-sugar foods.

Nuts fit seamlessly into this framework. They not only contribute beneficial nutrients, but also help displace less healthy options. When nuts replace processed snacks, refined carbohydrates, or animal fats, the overall quality of the diet improves significantly.

But these findings are not isolated. Similar results have emerged across continents and populations, using both observational and intervention research designs. In Spain, the landmark PREDIMED and PREDIMED-Plus trials demonstrated that supplementing a Mediterranean diet with nuts improved cardiovascular outcomes, cognitive performance, and metabolic health.^{2,3} Additionally, in the United States, data from the Nurses' Health Study and the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study have consistently shown that nut consumption is linked to greater longevity and reduced risk of chronic disease.⁴

Taken together, these findings reinforce the role of nuts as a key component of dietary patterns that promote health and vitality throughout the lifespan.

A Life-Course Perspective: Start Early, Reap Later

One of the most compelling messages from recent research is that when we adopt healthier eating habits matters. The benefits of a nut-rich, plant-based diet are most pronounced when maintained consistently over the long term. The *Nature Medicine* study showed that diet in midlife—our 40s and 50s—was a strong predictor of health in our 70s. But this doesn't mean it's ever too late to make changes. The PREDIMED study has demonstrated with a high level of evidence that participants older than 55 years showed a decreased risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other chronic conditions when they adhered to a healthy dietary pattern rich in nuts or virgin olive oil. Dietary improvements at any stage can contribute to better function and quality of life, even in older adults.

This offers a clear message: promoting dietary habits that include nuts is a highly actionable and impactful strategy for improving aging trajectories.

From Research to Your Plate

Based on this study and a growing body of evidence, here are five simple tips for incorporating nuts into your daily routine and promoting healthy aging:

- 1. Snack smart:** Replace chips, cookies, or other unhealthy snacks with a handful of unsalted nuts.
- 2. Upgrade your meals:** Add nuts to salads, oatmeal, or stir-fries for extra texture and nutrients.
- 3. Blend them in:** Use nut spreads in smoothies or on whole-grain toast.
- 4. Daily dose:** A handful (30 grams) per day is enough to reap health benefits.
- 5. Stay consistent:** Long-term, habitual consumption brings the best results.

Beyond Disease: Supporting Full Well-Being

Importantly, recent evidence shifts the focus from simply avoiding disease to promoting overall well-being in older age. This includes staying mentally engaged, physically capable, emotionally resilient, and socially active. Diets rich in plant-based foods, unprocessed or minimally-processed foods, and nuts contribute to all of these domains. A recent study of over 10,000 older adults further supports this, linking regular nut consumption with reduced frailty—a key factor in maintaining independence in later life.⁵

Interestingly, the benefits of healthy dietary patterns were even more pronounced in women, in individuals with higher body mass index, and in those with lower levels of physical activity. This suggests that a healthy diet might be especially helpful in mitigating other risk factors.

Nuts are much more than a healthy snack. They are a key element in dietary patterns that support long, independent, and fulfilling lives. Making nuts a regular part of our diets can be a simple yet powerful act of self-care with benefits that echo into our older years. 🌱

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