Both nutritious and likable, peanuts and peanut butter are recognized for the nutrition they provide and the taste we enjoy. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, whole peanuts cracked at the baseball game, peanut butter spread on an apple, are classic combinations enjoyed by both children and adults, day or night. Historically peanuts and peanut butter have long been valued for their taste and nutritional characteristics. Dating back to the 1800s a St. Louis physician encouraged a food products company to “process and package ground peanut paste as a nutritious protein substitute,” in part for people with poor teeth. During this time, peanut butter became a tasty and easy way to nourish patients because of its plant source of protein. Today peanuts and peanut butter remain a favorite food but are also praised for their unique nutrient profile and the positive health benefits they provide.
When broken down nutrient-by-nutrient it’s hard to imagine all of the components that get packaged into a peanut kernel. Vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and phytochemicals are the bioactive constituents that when combined with fiber, healthy fats, and plant protein, make for a functional powerhouse. Although peanuts have traditionally been recognized for their superior protein content compared to other nuts, they are now being acknowledged for their full package of nutrients and bioactive components. People are perceiving peanuts and peanut butter to be a super food. What’s better is that peanuts, unlike many popular and trendy super foods are a staple in the American diet. Easily accessible and affordable, peanuts are not hard to find or pair with other foods, unlike many other super foods.

The combined nutrients in peanuts, including their rich source of protein, are what make peanuts stand above the rest. Peanuts have the most protein per ounce of any other nut. They also have more arginine than most foods, with much more per serving than even eggs or milk. Arginine has numerous critical functions in the body. It is involved in making insulin, which helps take the sugar from our blood into cells to be utilized as energy. It is also converted to nitric oxide, which aids in the relaxation of blood vessels, promoting improved blood circulation throughout the body.

The plant chemical resveratrol, which is found in peanuts, has been touted recently because research is showing that its benefits may be extended to animals and humans. Resveratrol has been shown to provide protective benefits against cardiovascular and neurodegenerative diseases, inflammation, and cancer. It has also been referred to as an “anti-aging” and “life-extending” compound because of its action at the cellular level.

Adding power to the punch, peanuts also have phytosterols. Simply put, phytosterols are the plant form of cholesterol. They have a similar structure to the cholesterol that travels our bodies and when enough is consumed they will compete with cholesterol in the digestive tract to possibly help lower “bad” LDL cholesterol levels by blocking its absorption. A recent study by Jenkins, et al. showed that plant sterols contributed to over one third of the “bad” LDL cholesterol reduction that was seen with a diet used to improve blood lipids.

In addition, the American Heart Association released Diet and Lifestyle Recommendations in 2006, which advised people to consume plant sterols daily to help in maintaining “bad” LDL cholesterol reductions. Peanuts contain three main phytosterols: beta-sitosterol, campesterol, and stigmasterol.

Research has shown that chronic diseases including heart disease and diabetes are positively affected by diets rich in peanuts and peanut butter. Small daily portions of peanuts, 1 to 1 ½ ounces were associated with a 27% reduced risk of developing type 2 diabetes and a 50% reduction in heart disease. These benefits have been attributed to the fatty acid profile in peanuts as they are high in healthy mono- and polyunsaturated fats, but emerging research is showing that the plant protein in peanuts and other bioactive components may also be contributing. Data analyzed from the Nurses’ Health Study has recently shown a reduced risk of coronary heart disease and diabetes when plant sources of fat or protein are included in the diet. Peanuts also contribute fiber to the diet and since they are one of the lowest glycemic index foods, they keep your blood sugar on an even keel, helping to sustain energy. Together with their functional bioactives, vitamins and minerals, peanuts are one super food that provide big health benefits in a small package, that you don’t want to miss.
Despite excess energy intakes, overweight children are not meeting the dietary reference intakes (DRIs) or recommended daily allowance (RDA) for many nutrients, specifically vitamins and minerals \(^9,10\). Diseases such as diabetes, metabolic syndrome, and cardiovascular disease, once only seen later in life, are now starting earlier. These diseases are linked to obesity. The risk and earlier prevalence for developing these conditions may be exacerbated by certain micronutrient deficiencies.

Research analyzing USDA consumption data shows that people who eat peanuts and peanut products have higher quality diets and take in more hard-to-get nutrients than those who do not eat peanuts \(^11\). In another study conducted at Purdue University participants eating peanuts daily significantly elevated levels of blood magnesium \(^12\).

Since peanuts provide a variety of nutrients, bioactives, vitamins and minerals in a small package, a handful daily can improve nutritional status by increasing nutrients of concern such as vitamin E, magnesium, potassium, folate, and fiber. Making a small change in your diet by substituting peanuts for foods with minimal nutritional value can bring big rewards to your overall health.

Micro-nutrient comparisons of overweight children vs. normal weight children. Findings presented at the 2007 Northern American Association for the Study of Obesity (NASO) annual meeting \(^13\).

The food packages were also revised to better meet the recommendations of the 2005 US Dietary Guidelines, which recommend consuming “a variety of nutrient-dense foods” and eating “most fats from sources of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids”, like those in peanuts and peanut butter. Peanut butter, similar to peanuts, is an American staple. It is affordable while being treasured for its rich flavor. It is now recognized as a valuable food because of the nutrients it provides in a single serving, and helping at risk populations.

More Peanut Butter for Women, Infants, and Children

The supplemental nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) is now offering more peanut butter in their food packages. WIC food packages are designed to be rich in nutrients that are lacking in the diets of the WIC population. Peanut butter, which is high in protein and contains many nutrients that are of concern to the WIC population, such as folate, vitamin B6, vitamin E, and fiber, helps to meet nutrient needs during critical periods of growth and development.

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The word “whole” has been defined as “comprising the whole assemblage of parts or elements” or “a thing complete in itself”. There is growing recognition that “whole foods” are filled with many elements that can be acting together in a complex system. Often times, only single nutrients in foods are studied, and although we can learn from this research, this narrow scope and oversimplification may not explain all of the benefits that we see by consuming certain foods (16).

Peanuts are whole foods. They are a complex plant food with a mixture of nutrients and plant chemicals. Eating peanuts not only nourishes us with high levels of niacin, folate, and arginine, but also with healthy fats, phytosterols, flavonoids and bioactives to name a few. It is believed these constituents act together as a package in ways that we don’t fully understand. Research with fruits and vegetables has shown that it’s the “additive or synergistic effects” of all of the plant chemicals that are providing benefit (17).

Furthermore, evidence shows that the risk of chronic diseases appears to be lower with consumption of whole grains versus refined grains, indicating that the “benefit accrues when all edible part of the grain are included (18)”.

Data shows that mortality rates also decrease when nutrients are consumed from whole foods versus refined food sources (16).

The fact that studies have continued to show significant reductions in chronic disease risk from eating small amounts of peanuts daily, attests that there are likely unique nutrient synergies in peanuts that are benefiting our health.