

Wellness with Walnuts

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I'm going to suggest that this year you add something different to your Easter basket: walnuts. (Don't worry, I'll give you a recipe that turns them into candy!). Although I couldn't find enough healthful information—or any, actually—to recommend those odd little marshmallow “peeps”, adding in some walnuts instead will make your celebration both tasty and better for you.

Walnuts are one of the oldest known tree foods---archaeologists have found shells dating back 9,000 years! According to Greek mythology, Dionysus fell in love with a princess, Carya; when she died, he transformed her into the first walnut tree so she would always be nearby. Although the common walnut in this country is called an “English” walnut, they actually originated in Persia (perhaps they got that name after English sailors transported them home).

Walnuts are “brain food”; they have ten times more ALA than any other nut, and as we've discussed before, ALA and other Omega 3 fatty acids play a role in treating depression and improving cognition. They also lower total cholesterol, LDL (“bad”) cholesterol and Lp(a), as well as reducing inflammation. Interestingly, the cholesterol lowering effects were shown in a study of Mediterranean diets, comparing a diet in which the bulk of healthy fats came from olive oil vs one rich in walnuts (the nuts were the deciding factor in the results). Animal studies suggest that the Vit E along with the Omega 3 fatty acids in walnuts lowers levels of endothelin, a substance that increases inflammation and growth of plaque in blood vessels. Blood pressure can also be lowered with walnuts; these nuts are high in L-arginine, which is converted to nitric oxide, which then dilates blood vessels, dropping blood pressure. (Although it hasn't been studied, this same mechanism improves erectile dysfunction and is the mode of action of Viagra and similar medications).

Walnuts are also one of the best food sources of melatonin. Melatonin, in addition to aiding jet lag, is a powerful antioxidant that may help to reduce Alzheimer's, cancer, cardiovascular disease and other chronic conditions. Walnuts are also a good source of manganese and copper, two microminerals necessary in a healthy diet. Also, although the connection isn't clear, the Nurses Health Study found an association between increased walnut consumption and fewer cases of gallstone formation.

In cooking with walnuts, toasting them improves flavor. However, roast them at low temperatures to avoid damaging the healthy oils (160-170 degrees for 15-20 minutes). I would also suggest eating them raw when you can. Store them either in the freezer or refrigerator, to avoid having the oils become rancid.

Candied Walnuts:

Melt a small amount of brown rice syrup over low heat. Add in a dash or two of cinnamon, then pour over shelled walnuts (larger pieces are preferred). Stir to coat, then

spread out onto waxed paper (or a Silpat ® mat) and allow to dry/harden. Small bags of these treats are a fine addition to Easter baskets, showers and other parties, or just your lunchbox!

Options—make spicier nuts by adding ground cumin and ground cardamom along with the cinnamon. You can also consider adding small chunks of dark chocolate and dried cherries and dropping the mixture onto the waxed paper by the teaspoonful.