

Health Benefits of Pistachio Nuts



Dr Carrie Ruxton, PhD, RD,
Freelance Dietitian, Nutrition
Communications - @DrCarrieRuxton



In recent years nuts – the edible seed of a tree – have emerged as a healthy, nutritious snack. Beyond peanuts, which are actually part of the legume family, tree nuts include pistachios, almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, walnuts and pecan nuts. Nuts have been gathered and eaten by humans for thousands of years. For example, radiocarbon dating of hazelnut shells found on Colonsay, a Scottish island, revealed that nuts were being cultivated around 7000 years BC. Similar evidence has been found in Mesolithic midden pits all over the UK. Nowadays nuts are cultivated in most regions of the world and are often highly valued, as demonstrated in Brazil where it is illegal to chop down a Brazil nut tree. Pistachios are even mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible.

This article is based on a presentation delivered to dietitians and nutritionists attending a roundtable event in February and will look at the nutritional profile of pistachio nuts as well as evidence for health benefits.

Pistachios

Originating in the Middle East, where they were cultivated for thousands of years, pistachio trees are now grown across warmer parts of Europe and America having been brought to new countries by traders and travellers. The American pistachio story began in the 1930s when a curious botanist experimented with hundreds of individual seeds to see which ones would thrive in the warm, dry climate of California. Only one did and several decades and stages of propagation later, America has one of the most successful pistachio crops in the world, providing nuts for home and foreign markets.

With the recent interest in sustainable food production, it is worth noting that pistachio farming is fairly advanced in this area. Pests are partly controlled by allowing beneficial insects to reside in the trees, water use is minimised as pistachios are highly resistant to drought, while problems with coyote packs have been addressed using the novel solution of owls which are housed in the orchards. Solar power is increasingly used to power the roasting and packaging of the nuts.

Nutrition

Compared with other tree nuts, pistachios tend to be higher in protein and fibre and lower in fat. **Table One** presents the macronutrient composition per serving showing the large variation between nuts. The highest fat content is seen in pecan and macadamia nuts, while Brazil and macadamia nuts contain the most saturated fat. Fibre is highest in almonds followed by

pistachios, and with the exception of cashews, nuts can officially claim to be 'rich in fibre'. Only pistachios and almonds can make a protein content claim. Like other tree nuts, the fat in pistachios is primarily unsaturated with the largest proportion coming from monounsaturated fatty acids, meeting the criteria to be labelled as 'high' in these fats.

According to EU law, pistachio nuts are a 'source' (15 % Nutrient Reference Value) of riboflavin, folate and vitamins K and E, as well as a source of all the major minerals; iron, magnesium, selenium and zinc. Pistachios are also 'rich in' (30% Nutrient Reference Value) thiamin, vitamin B6, phosphorus, potassium, chromium, manganese and copper. This means that pistachios qualify for several authorised EU health claims relating to their micronutrient content as listed in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Article 13.1 Health Claims Relating to Nutrients in Pistachios

- Heart function
- Energy
- Reduction in tiredness and fatigue
- Bone health
- Muscle function
- Antioxidant
- Blood pressure
- Normal vision
- Immune function
- Spermatogenesis
- Fertility
- Teeth
- Skin, hair and nails
- Cognitive function