

Pistachios Pummel Cholesterol

Pistachios, Sunflower Seeds Richest in Cholesterol-Lowering Phytosterols

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Dec. 9, 2005 -- Pistachios and sunflower seeds may be some of the best snacks for people watching their cholesterol levels.

A new study shows pistachios and sunflower seeds contain the most cholesterol-lowering phytosterols of commonly eaten nuts and seeds.

Phytosterols are a group of chemicals found in plants that are similar in chemical structure to cholesterol. Several studies have shown that high doses of the plant chemicals through supplementation can lower blood cholesterol levels and reduce the risk of some types of cancer.

But researchers say recent studies show that much lower levels of phytosterols, such as those obtained through a diet rich in natural sources of phytosterols, may also be effective at lowering cholesterol. Therefore, determining the phytosterol content of popular foods is important in helping people achieve the maximum cholesterol-lowering benefits.

Cholesterol-Lowering Content Varies

Nuts and seeds are rich sources of phytosterols, but researchers say until now a comprehensive analysis of their phytosterol content hasn't been conducted.

In the study, published in *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry*, researchers assessed and compared the phytosterol content of 27 popular nut and seed varieties.

Although sesame seeds and wheat germ contained the highest overall level of phytosterols, researchers say they are not commonly consumed as individual foods.

Among commonly eaten nuts and seeds, pistachios and sunflower seeds had the highest phytosterol content, followed by pumpkin seeds, pine nuts, almonds, macadamia nuts, black walnuts, pecans, cashews, peanuts, and hazelnuts. In comparison, chocolate ranked between black walnuts and pecans in phytosterol content.

Brazil nuts and English walnuts ranked the lowest in phytosterols. But researchers say phytosterols are only one potential cholesterol-lowering ingredient found in nuts and seeds and other ingredients may also provide heart-healthy benefits.



SOURCES: Phillips, K. *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry*, Nov. 30, 2005; vol 53: pp 9436-9435. News release, American Chemical Society.

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