

SHOPPING SMART FOR PEANUTS

They're high in calories, but that doesn't make peanuts a health villain: Inside their dimpled shells is a snack rich in heart-healthy fat and filling protein. Just don't go too far beyond a handful; that's when we start racking up the calories, not to mention the sugar and salt lurking in snacks many of us go nuts for. Here, a nutritional road map to this familiar fave.

BY CARA BIRNBAUM

Shelled Peanuts

If you'd rather crack open a jar, unsalted nuts are best, but salted are still a good runner-up. Dry-roasted nuts should contain three ingredients, tops: peanuts, natural seasonings, and maybe a touch of sea salt. If you prefer oil-roasted, go for it; calorie differences are teeny. Flavored nuts, like honey-roasted, can mean corn syrup and more, so skip those.



really healthy

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Shell-On Peanuts

Why are shell-on the healthiest? Cracking them open will help keep you from mindlessly gobbling. That's a plus, considering a half cup of shelled peanuts contains close to 450 calories. So aim instead for a 1-ounce serving of shelled—just make a golf-ball-size scoop with your hand. You'll get 7 grams of satisfying protein plus a dose of fiber, which can help lower blood sugar. Leave on the papery skins for a shot of resveratrol, the same antioxidant found in red grapes.



Most of the fat in peanuts is the "good" kind that nutritionists heartily approve of.

Natural Peanut Butter

Spreads made of just peanuts and a dash of salt pack a protein-rich punch without the sugar and higher amounts of sodium that can show up in more-processed versions. All PBs have about 200 calories per 2 tablespoons. What about the reduced-fat kind? Since many brands use sugar to amp up the flavor, you don't save many calories in the end.

STYLING BY CLAUDIA FICCA AT APOSTROPHE

Powdered Peanut Butter

This fairly new-on-the-scene powder is made by pressing out peanuts' oil—and around 90% of their fat—for a 45-calorie 2-tablespoon serving. Sprinkle over popcorn or into a smoothie, or for a classic PB vibe, mix with water to make a spread. Some powders include sugar, so look for 1 gram or less per serving.



Packaged Trail Mix

Simple combos of peanuts and dried fruit are your best go-tos for trail mix, as long as you keep in mind that just a couple of tablespoons can contain 140 calories. Not bad, except who sticks to a couple? Skip the blends loaded with chocolate and fried banana chips, which can bring the calorie count to a ridiculous 300-plus calories for the same puny serving. Your best bet: a DIY mix of whole-grain cereal, raisins, unsweetened apricots, and unsalted peanuts. Tossed together in minutes, it will keep you going for hours.

Sources: Lauri Wright, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Community and Family Health, University of South Florida College of Public Health; Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., adjunct professor, Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, New York University

Peanut Sauce

The calories aren't bad (about 80 a serving), but sodium is the wild card with this Thai-inspired favorite. Some brands inch toward 700 milligrams—more than 100 potato chips' worth—in 2 tablespoons. Stick with those on the lower end (less than 100 milligrams), and flavor up a healthy mix of soba noodles and veggies.



Peanut Brittle

Lots of brittles call for equal parts sugar and peanuts. That means a 2-ounce serving (about 2 square inches) can have 29 grams of the sweet stuff, so nibble sparingly.



not so healthy

Chocolate-Peanut Candy

With 25 grams of sugar (about the max you should get in a day) and 250 calories per pack, they can't be called virtuous. But the candy's 5 grams of protein may energize you longer than some other vending machine options. Wondering about peanut butter cups? They have about the same amount of sugar—but six times the sodium per serving.



WHAT ABOUT PEANUT OIL?

Research shows it's got nearly as much heart-healthy fat as olive oil. (Both oils have the same number of calories—119 a tablespoon.) Peanut oil also has a high smoke point, which is why it's a favorite for dishes cooked over very high heat, like stir-fries. Use the oil in any dish that would taste great with a hint of nuttiness.