Nutrition News You Can Use: Eating more nuts could save thousands of lives and make us healthier and wealthier, say scientists

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Making simple changes in what we eat could result in a 50% reduction in the burden on non-communicable diseases and make us far healthier as well as saving considerable sums in healthcare costs, according to American and British editorialists in the British Medical Journal. Professors Dariush Mozaffarian of Harvard and Simon Capewell of Liverpool universities, both respected epidemiologists, argue that type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer and complications of obesity in particular all have diet as a powerful common determinant. If we improved our diets, we would reduce the level – and costs – of disease. To achieve that, they propose eight dietary priorities drawn from existing research knowledge, recommending six beneficial foods to eat more of and two harmful substances to reduce in foods, namely industrial trans-fats and sodium. Prominent in the list of foods to eat more of are nuts, meaning peanuts and treenuts, which should be substituted, the authors say, for starches, refined grains and sugars.

Professors Mozaffarian and Capewell are clear about the benefits of adopting their proposed changes and their editorial commends this approach to the United Nations and other international and governmental bodies. They argue, "The proposed targeted changes are modest, reflect changes achieved in population based interventions, and are supported by observed consumption distributions within and across countries. Meeting any one target would produce substantial benefits. The eight targets together could halve global cardiovascular disease, annually preventing more than five million premature deaths from cardiovascular disease (and 10 million deaths from cardiovascular disease overall), while simultaneously reducing obesity, diabetes, and common cancers. Over just a few years, these modest dietary improvements could prevent one million deaths from cardiovascular disease in the US and 30 million worldwide."

Peanuts and other nuts play a pivotal role in these dietary priorities, since eating more of them, the authors claim, would achieve the biggest changes of all in terms of reductions in deaths from cardiovascular disease. The authors provide compelling statistics to back up their recommendations. They believe a reasonable target for change is to increase nut consumption in place of some of the starches, refined grains, and sugars people now eat. They argue that two more servings of peanuts or other nuts per week (which would amount to only about 2.5% of total food energy) could achieve about an 11% overall risk reduction in deaths from cardiovascular disease (CVD). They calculate this would mean about 90,000 fewer deaths in the US and about 2.2m fewer deaths from heart disease globally.

Substituting other beneficial foods also have big risk reduction effects: more fish and seafood 5%; more vegetables 7%; more fruit 8% and more whole grains 10%. Nuts have the biggest potential impact on reducing risk of CVD deaths at 11%. And in addition, increasing consumption of vegetable oils – such as peanut oil – in place of animal fats (reflecting about 3% of total food energy) could achieve an additional 5% reduction in CVD mortality risk.

These eight dietary priorities represent staggeringly large beneficial changes – a total of 52% risk reduction in deaths from CVD. Their potential positive economic impact on society and health care systems, quite apart from the health gain that would accrue to individuals, cannot be ignored. Nuts including peanuts could not be more central to this dietary priority strategy to prevent cardiovascular and other diseases.

Ref: Mozaffarian D, Capewell S. “United Nations’ dietary policies to prevent cardiovascular disease: modest diet changes could halve the global burden”. BMJ 2011;343:d5747 and www.bmj.com/content/343/bmj.d5747/suppl/DC1 (15 September 2011)