

Healthy Habits

A Guide to Nut and Seed Butters



The peanut butter aisle sure has changed since we were kids! Whether you prefer creamy or chunky, raw or roasted, almond, walnut or peanut-free, there really is something for everyone these days. These spreads can add heart-healthy fats and protein to your diet, but not all nut and seed butters are created equal.

Read on to learn about the flavors and nutritional benefits of the most common varieties of nut and seed spreads. There's even tips for making your own nut and seed butters at home!

Peanut Butter

Contrary to the name, peanuts are actually legumes, but they're nutritionally comparable to other popular nuts like almonds, hazelnuts and cashews. One serving of peanut butter contains around 190 calories, 16 grams of fat (three grams from saturated fat) and eight grams of protein and is rich in heart-healthy monounsaturated fats. Recent research shows that roasted peanuts are also a good source of antioxidants, rivaling the amount found in some berries. Look for peanut butters made from roasted peanuts to get the most antioxidant benefit, and check the ingredient lists if you're looking for varieties that contain only peanuts and salt without added sugars or oils.

Almond Butter

If you're looking to broaden your nut butter selection beyond peanuts, almond butter is a great choice since it's similar in texture and thickness with a slightly nuttier taste than your standard PB. It can be made from either raw or roasted almonds, and, like peanut butter, is available in chunky and smooth varieties.

Nutritionally, pure almond butter contains a bit more monounsaturated fat than peanut butter and about the same amount of protein. Each two-tablespoon serving of pure almond butter provides around 180 calories, 16 grams of fat (one gram from saturated fat) and seven grams of protein. Most almond butters are typically also lower in sugar and contain no hydrogenated oils, a common source of unhealthy trans fats, but some brands do contain added sugar to increase likeability and/or palm oil to prevent oil separation. When shopping for almond butter, look for brands with two ingredients: almonds and salt — or try making your own. All you need is a cup or two of almonds, a food processor and a few minutes!

Hazelnut Butter

One two-tablespoon serving of pure hazelnut butter provides slightly fewer calories, fat and protein than peanut butter. Each serving contains around 160 calories, 14 grams of fat (three grams from saturated fat) and five grams of protein. Like other nut butters, hazelnut butter is high in monounsaturated fats, but hazelnuts are also particularly high in oleic acid, which has been shown to play a role in lowering harmful LDL cholesterol.

By itself, hazelnut butter is a great alternative to almond or peanut butter but it can be harder to find. (Don't confuse pure hazelnut butter with hazelnut spreads, which are sweetened with chocolate and added sugar.) Try hazelnut butter in lieu of peanut butter on a sandwich, mixed into a bowl of oatmeal, added to a smoothie or spread on a few dates.

Cashew Butter

The blonde of nut butters, cashew butter offers the same heart-healthy monounsaturated fats as peanut butter but has slightly fewer calories and less fat and protein, with each serving providing about 180 calories, 14 grams of fat (2.5 grams from saturated fat) and six grams of protein.

Made from both raw and roasted cashews, cashew butter has a milder taste than almond butter and typically does not contain added sugar like many processed peanut butters do. Like hazelnuts, cashews also contain higher amounts of cholesterol-friendly oleic acid. Cashew butter can be used in lieu of peanut butter in cookies, sauces and even smoothies.

Walnut Butter

By itself, walnut butter has an earthy, sometimes bitter taste, though varieties made from soaked, roasted nuts tend to be milder in flavor. Walnuts are prized for being high in healthy omega-3s, fats that have been shown to have numerous cardio protective benefits thanks to their anti-inflammatory properties. This makes walnut butter a great addition to your refrigerator, especially if you have a hard time getting enough omega-3s from other sources such as mackerel, salmon, albacore tuna, sardines and chia seeds. All nut butters will keep longer in the fridge, but walnut butter's fragile omega-3 fats can turn rancid easily, so it's especially important to keep it chilled.

Nutritionally, pure walnut butter provides slightly more calories and fat than other nut butters, around 200 calories, 19 grams of fat (two grams from saturated fat) and five grams of protein per two-tablespoon serving.

Soy Nut Butter

Soy nut butter was created as an alternative to peanut butter for those allergic to peanuts and tree nuts. It is made from roasted, ground soybeans and, while it is thick and creamy like peanut butter, it has a unique flavor that may not appeal to everyone or work as a nut butter substitute in every scenario.

Even though the flavor is different, soybean-derived butter is nutritionally comparable to peanut butter. Two tablespoons of unsweetened soy nut butter contains around 190 calories, 14 grams of total fat (two grams of that from saturated fat) and eight grams of protein. Like most other nut butters, some brands add sugar and/or palm oil, so check the label before buying. It is also available in creamy and crunchy textures.

Sunflower Butter

Like soy nut butter, sunflower butter (also called SunButter) was developed as a peanut butter alternative for those with allergies. Sunflower butter is made from ground sunflower seeds, and is oftentimes blended with sugar, salt and additional oil to improve texture and palatability. This smooth seed butter is a closer cousin to peanut butter taste- and texture-wise than soy nut butter, but it has an oilier consistency so it's best kept refrigerated.

A two-tablespoon serving contains around 200 calories, 16 grams of total fat (two grams from saturated fat), and seven grams of protein. Since most brands add sugar, there are about three grams of sugar per serving compared to the two grams in unsweetened peanut butter. Sunflower butter contains a bit more fiber and iron, with each serving providing around four grams of fiber and eight percent of the daily recommendation for iron.

Sunflower butter can be used just like you would peanut butter: in sandwiches, sauces, baked goods and smoothies, and even spread on apple slices and celery.

Pumpkin Seed Butter

Pumpkin seed butter is made from either raw or roasted ground pumpkin seeds. It's similar in texture to peanut butter but has a richer, earthier taste and is greenish in color. Nutritionals vary between brands since some contain extra oil and added sugars, but on average, two tablespoons of pumpkin seed butter provides around 160 calories, 13 grams of total fat (around two grams from saturated fat) and five grams of protein. Pure pumpkin seed butter is higher in iron though, with one two-tablespoon serving providing upwards of 15 to 20 percent of the daily recommendation.

Pumpkin seed butter can be made from raw or roasted pumpkin seeds, however, absorption of certain nutrients may be enhanced by consuming varieties made from raw, sprouted pumpkin seeds.

Pumpkin seed butter can be used just like you would peanut butter: in sandwiches, sauces, baked goods, homemade energy bars and more!

Mixed Nut Butters

Nut butters made from a mix of nuts, rather than one single nut or seed, have been growing in popularity — and it's easy to taste why. Grinding a blend of favorite nuts together can yield delicious results, oftentimes without any added sugar.

Flavor and nutrition facts will vary from jar to jar, or batch to batch if you make your own, but most mixed nut butters will have comparable calories, fat and protein per serving as other nut and seed butters. Several blends out there are also peanut-free, which may be a good alternative for those with a peanut allergy. Just be sure to take a peek at the label to find blends made without added sugar, palm oil or other extra ingredients.

Buying and Storing Tips

Ready to start expanding your nut butter collection? Here are a few tips to take with you the next time you head to the grocery store:

- **Read ingredient lists.** You probably know by now that not all nut butters are nutritionally equal. Try to avoid those that contain hydrogenated oils (trans fats) and added sugar, and look for varieties that contain only nuts or seeds and salt.
- **Buy nuts in bulk.** If you want to experiment with freshly-ground nut and seed butter, see if any of your local grocery stores have bulk bins. Buying loose nuts and seeds, as opposed to bagged or packaged, and grinding them yourself, is typically less expensive than buying premium jarred varieties. Some grocery stores now even have grinders in-house, saving you the cleanup from making nut butter at home.
- **Store them in the refrigerator.** Most nut and seed butters can tolerate being stored on a pantry shelf for a while, but all will fare better in the refrigerator once they've been opened. An opened jar will typically keep for three to six months in the fridge with the exception of walnut butter, which won't last quite as long.