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Brazil nut good for you, whether raw or roasted

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I recently purchased some whole, raw Brazil nuts. Now I'm worried. Am I really allowed to eat them raw?

Many tree nuts are available in raw form, particularly from whole and natural foods markets. Some people prefer to eat raw nuts, reasoning that they are less processed, and thus more nutritious. Although roasting does destroy some B vitamins, whether to eat raw or roasted nuts is a personal choice. Raw or cooked, Brazil nuts are a good source of fiber and selenium. Beware the calories, however. A half cup of Brazil nuts contains more than 400 calories and 44 grams fat. The saturated fat content is higher than in most other nuts, even that of macadamia nuts.

Environmentalists have taken an interest in the Brazil nut. The Brazil nut tree is a huge (165-foot) tree that grows in the Amazonian rain forest. Because of cultivation requirements and a symbiotic relationship with a native orchid, it cannot be effectively grown on plantations. It only bears fruit in the virgin forest. Therefore, it is a nontimber cash crop that encourages the maintenance of large, sustainable forested areas.

Next time you're in the Amazon, keep your eyes on the canopy overhead. The grapefruit-sized fruit contain 8 to 25 nuts and weigh about 5 pounds. Several people are injured or killed each year from being struck on the head by falling fruit.

The nuts are also the inspiration for the so-called Brazil nut effect: the phenomenon whereby large particles in a mix will work their way to the top and smaller particles slide underneath. Like Brazil nuts in a bowl full of peanuts.

Because of their high fat content, nuts can go rancid easily. So keep your shelled Brazil nuts in the refrigerator until you use them.

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