**Pumpkin Seed Dried Cherry Trail Mix**

Recipe courtesy Claire Robinson, 2009

**Cook Time**: 20 min

**Level:** Easy

**Serves:** about 6 cups

**Ingredients**

2 cups baby pumpkin seeds (pepitas)

1 cup slivered almonds

3/4 cup raw sunflower seeds

6 tablespoons pure Grade B maple syrup (can substitute maple syrup, honey, or agave)

Coarse salt

1 cup dried cherries or cranberries (optional)

**Directions**

Preheat the oven to 300 degrees F. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats. In a large bowl, toss the pumpkin seeds, almonds, and sunflower seeds and the syrup until evenly coated. Spread the nuts and seeds out, in an even single layer, on the lined baking sheets and season with salt to taste. Bake the nuts, stirring several times with spatula or wooden spoon, until just golden, about 20 minutes.

Cool the nuts completely on the pan then add the cherries and toss to combine. Store cooled trail mix in an airtight container at room temperature.

**Health Benefits of ingredients:**

**Pumpkin seeds**-Pumpkins, and their seeds, are native to the Americas, and indigenous species are found across North America, South America, and Central America. The word "pepita" is consistent with this heritage, since it comes from Mexico, where the Spanish phrase "pepita de calabaza" means "little seed of squash."

Plants that have a close relationship to the soil are often special sources of mineral nutrients, minerals phosphorus, magnesium, manganese, and copper and a good source of the minerals zinc and iron. Pumpkin seeds contain the antioxidant vitamin E and are anti-microbial benefits, including their anti-fungal and anti-viral properties

**Almonds-** Almonds are high in monounsaturated fats, the same type of health-promoting fats as are found in olive oil, which have been associated with reduced risk of heart disease. Almonds also decrease after-meal rises in blood sugar.

In addition to healthy fats and vitamin E, a quarter-cup of almonds contains 62 mg of [magnesium](http://www.whfoods.com/genpage.php?tname=nutrient&dbid=75)plus 162 mg of [potassium](http://www.whfoods.com/genpage.php?tname=nutrient&dbid=90). Magnesium is Nature's own calcium channel blocker. When there is enough magnesium around, veins and arteries breathe a sigh of relief and relax, which lessens resistance and improves the flow of blood, oxygen and nutrients throughout the body. Studies show that a deficiency of magnesium is not only associated with heart attack but that immediately following a heart attack, lack of sufficient magnesium promotes free radical injury to the heart.

Potassium, an important electrolyte involved in nerve transmission and the contraction of all muscles including the heart, is another mineral that is essential for maintaining normal blood pressure and heart function. Almonds promote your cardiovascular health by providing 162 mg of potassium and only 0.2 mg of sodium, making almonds an especially good choice to in protecting against high blood pressure and atherosclerosis.

**Sunflower seed**s-Sunflower seeds are the gift of the beautiful sunflower.The flower produces grayish-green or black seeds encased in tear-dropped shaped gray or black shells that oftentimes feature black and white stripes. Since these seeds have a very high oil content, they are one of the main sources of polyunsaturated oil.

Sunflower seeds are an excellent source of [vitamin E](http://www.whfoods.com/genpage.php?tname=nutrient&dbid=111), the body's primary fat-soluble antioxidant. Vitamin E travels throughout the body neutralizing free radicals that would otherwise damage fat-containing structures and molecules, such as cell membranes, brain cells, and cholesterol. By protecting these cellular and molecular components, vitamin E has significant anti-inflammatory effects that result in the reduction of symptoms in asthma, osteoarthritis, and rheumatoid arthritis, conditions where free radicals and inflammation play a big role. Vitamin E has also been shown to reduce the risk of colon cancer, help decrease the severity and frequency of hot flashes in women going through menopause, and help reduce the development of diabetic complications.

Sunflower seeds are high in not only vitamin E, but copper, manganese, selenium, mangnesium, and some of the valuable B vitamins; B6, B1, B3, and folate.

**Dried cherries-** While sweet cherries contain a variety of health benefits, tart cherries (like the Montmorency and Balaton varieties) are loaded with antioxidants, have been shown to reduce muscle soreness, and fight heart disease thanks to their anti-inflammatory properties. They can even help you sleep better at night as they contain melatonin – a hormone secreted by the brain that regulates our sleep cycle. Eat a handful of dried tart cherries every day as a low-cal snack, especially after dinner. In one[study](http://naturalmedicinejournal.com/article_content.asp?edition=1&section=3&article=323)participants drank 30ml of cherry juice 30 minutes after waking and 30 minutes before their evening meal, thereby boosting their exogenous melatonin intake by 85mcg/day.

**Cherries battle belly fat.**[Researchers](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/04/080407114647.htm)found that tart cherries have significant weight management benefits for animals, including reduced belly fat. In the study, rats that received whole tart cherry powder mixed into a high-fat diet didn't gain as much weight or build up as much body fat as rats that didn't receive cherries.