Review of the health benefits of peas (Pisum sativum L.)

Wendy J. Dahl1*, Lauren M. Foster1 and Robert T. Tyler2

1Food Science and Human Nutrition Department, University of Florida, 359 FSHN Building, Newell Drive, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA
2Department of Food and Bioproduct Sciences, University of Saskatchewan, 51 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, Canada S7N 5A8

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Abstract

Pulses, including peas, have long been important components of the human diet due to their content of starch, protein and other nutrients. More recently, the health benefits other than nutrition associated with pulse consumption have attracted much interest. The focus of the present review paper is the demonstrated and potential health benefits associated with the consumption of peas, Pisum sativum L., specifically green and yellow cotyledon dry peas, also known as smooth peas or field peas. These health benefits derive mainly from the concentration and properties of starch, protein, fibre, vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals in peas. Fibre from the seed coat and the cell walls of the cotyledon contributes to gastrointestinal function and health, and reduces the digestibility of starch in peas. The intermediate amylose content of pea starch also contributes to its lower glycaemic index and reduced starch digestibility. Pea protein, when hydrolysed, may yield peptides with bioactivities, including angiotensin I-converting enzyme inhibitor activity and antioxidant activity. The vitamin and mineral contents of peas may play important roles in the prevention of deficiency-related diseases, specifically those related to deficiencies of Se or folate. Peas contain a variety of phytochemicals once thought of only as antinutritive factors. These include polyphenolics, in coloured seed coat types in particular, which may have antioxidant and anticarcinogenic activity, saponins which may exhibit hypocholesterolaemic and anticarcinogenic activity, and galactose oligosaccharides which may exert beneficial prebiotic effects in the large intestine.

Key words: Peas: Pisum sativum L: Health benefits

Pulses are defined by the FAO as legumes harvested solely for their seed which is consumed directly. The FAO list includes eleven primary pulses, including peas, and excludes the oilseed legumes and those consumed in immature form as vegetables11. Peas, more specifically the yellow or green cotyledon varieties known as dry, smooth or field peas, are the naturally dried seeds of Pisum sativum L. and are grown around the world for human and animal consumption. World production of peas in 2009 was more than ten million tonnes, the major producers being Canada, the Russian Federation, China, the USA and India12. Peas have long been recognised as an inexpensive, readily available source of protein, complex carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. The high nutrient density of peas makes them a valuable food commodity, capable of meeting the dietary needs of the estimated 800–900 million undernourished individuals worldwide13. The US Department of Agriculture My Plate Guidelines recommend consuming at least three cups of dry beans and peas per week44. The majority of the US population consumes less than the recommended serving, with only 7.9% of adults consuming dry beans or peas on any given day55.

In recent years, many studies have identified potential health benefits of pulses, including peas, beyond meeting basic nutrient requirements. The purpose of the present paper is to provide a comprehensive review of the demonstrated and potential health benefits associated with pea consumption. The nutrient composition (summarised in Table 1) and phytochemical constituents of peas are described in order to provide context for the proposed mechanisms by which pea consumption benefits health. Limitations of current research and recommended future directions are discussed to encourage advancement in the field.

Compositional information

Protein

Peas are a valuable source of protein for both man and animals. The protein content of peas may be influenced by

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* Corresponding author: Dr W. J. Dahl, fax +1 352 392 6497, email wdahl@ufl.edu
Table 1. Compositional data for peas (Pisum sativum L.) (6–13)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituent</th>
<th>Concentration (%)*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protein (% N × 6:25)</td>
<td>21.2–32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starch</td>
<td>36.9–49.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistant starch</td>
<td>2.1–6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amylose</td>
<td>20.7–33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total dietary fibre</td>
<td>14–26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insoluble fibre</td>
<td>10–15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soluble fibre</td>
<td>2–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soluble sugars</td>
<td>6.3–8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total lipid</td>
<td>1.2–2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ash</td>
<td>2.3–3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Values are expressed on a moisture-free basis except for amylose, which is expressed on a starch basis.

Complex carbohydrates

Starch and fibre are major components of peas, 46 and 20% of seed DM, respectively, on average (13). The chemical attributes and functional characteristics of starch and fibre in pulses, including peas, were reviewed by Hoover et al. (21) and Tosh & Yada (7), respectively.

Starch is composed of amylose, a linear glucan with few branches, and amylopectin, a larger and more highly branched molecule. The ratio of amylose to amylopectin influences the digestibility of starch and thus its impact on the postprandial glucose response (22). pea starch, like that of most other starchy pulses, contains an intermediate level of amylose, which is reflected in its unique functionality and its higher levels of enzyme-resistant starch and slowly digestible starch (as compared with cereal, root and tuber starches, most of which are lower in amylose) (21). The relatively low degree of digestibility of starch in pulses has also been attributed to the non-availability to amylases of starch granules enclosed in intact cell wall structures, the presence of anti-nutrients such as amylase inhibitors, phytates and phenolics, and their significant content of dietary fibre (23). Perera et al. (24) concluded that variety, processing method and analytical methodology all affected starch digestibility, specifically levels of resistant starch, in peas and other pulses. Flour from three pea genotypes contained 9.2–10.7, 23.3–26.5 and 10.1–14.7% of rapidly digestible starch, slowly digestible starch and resistant starch, respectively (25). Starch isolated from the same three genotypes consisted of 18.2–23.8, 53.7–59.0 and 8.1–12.6% of rapidly digestible starch, slowly digestible starch and resistant starch, respectively (26). The proportion of the starch in peas that is slowly digestible is noteworthy. Annealing and heat-moisture treatment of pea starch had variable effects on the in vitro digestibility of pea starch (25,27). The effect of treatment on starch digestibility was variety dependent, and with all treatments, gelatinisation of starch converted essentially all of the slowly digestible starch, and in some cases most of the resistant starch, to rapidly digestible starch.

The amylose content of pea starch has been reported to vary widely among varieties and mutant lines (26). Starch from wrinkled peas, which are technologically not pulses since they are consumed in immature form as a vegetable, contains 60% or more of amylose (23). Wrinkled pea starch has been reported to contain 76.8% amylose and 4.5–17.7% of resistant starch, as compared with 27.8% amylose and 21–6.3% resistant starch in smooth peas, with the concentration of both amylose and resistant starch dependent on variety and the growth environment (13). Hood-Niefer et al. (16) saw no effect of variety or environment on the amylose content of pea starch. However, this study did not include wrinkled pea varieties.

Dietary fibre in peas arises from both the seed coat (outer fibre), commonly referred to as the hull, and the cotyledon (inner fibre). The seed coat contains largely water-insoluble polysaccharides, primarily cellulose, whereas the cotyledon fibre consists of polysaccharides having various degrees of solubility, including hemicelluloses and pectins, along with cellulose (7,28,29).
The properties of both their starch and fibre constituents make peas a low-glycaemic index food, and hence beneficial in the prevention and management of type 2 diabetes(40). In addition, fibre may reduce blood cholesterol by decreasing the reabsorption of bile acids(31). Peas, like other legumes, contain significant concentrations of raffinose-family and other galactose-containing oligosaccharides(37) which may exert prebiotic effects in the large intestine(32).

**Vitamins and minerals**

Reichert & MacKenzie(29) determined the concentrations of the major minerals in four pea samples. Potassium (1·04 % of dry, dehulled weight) was found to be the most prominent element, followed by P (0·39 %), Mg (0·10 %) and Ca (0·08 %). The quantities of seven trace minerals also were measured. The pea samples contained an average of 97 parts per million (ppm) Fe, 42 ppm Se, 41 ppm Zn, 12 ppm Mo, 11 ppm Mn, 9 ppm Cu and 4 ppm B. Gawalko et al.(33) determined that yellow peas from Canada contained higher levels of Fe, Mg and Mn, but lower levels of K, compared with green peas. In the same study, Se was found to exceed the maximum residue level established by the People's Republic of China in 56 % of the samples analysed. However, Se is considered an essential element, and this maximum residue level value is currently being re-evaluated. The authors suggested that peas produced in Canada may be beneficial for areas of the world where Se deficiency is prominent.

Despite the high mineral content of peas, bioavailability may be poor due to high phytate concentrations. Sandberg(34) reported that phytate acts as an inhibitor of Zn, Fe and Ca absorption. A study by Trinidad et al.(30) found that phytate content affected Fe but did not influence Zn and Ca availability in pulses. In fact, these authors concluded that when Fe availability was low, Ca and Zn availability was high. The study also reported that peas have greater in vitro Ca bioavailability compared with other pulses. More research should be carried out to understand the effects of food processing techniques on phytate degradation. If phytate is degraded, peas could be considered a significant source of Ca, Zn and Fe(34).

Dang et al.(35) reported that peas contained 101 μg folate per 100 g. Han & Tyler(36) determined that the concentration of folate in two yellow pea genotypes grown in six locations in 1 year in Saskatchewan, Canada, ranged from 23·7 to 55·6 μg/100 g DM, as determined by a microbiological assay; concentrations of folate in two green pea genotypes grown in three locations in each of two growing seasons ranged from 24·9 to 64·8 μg/100 g DM. Low dietary folate levels have been associated with anaemia and neural tube defects in humans(35,36).

**Phytochemicals**

The concentrations of minor constituents in pulses, including peas, and their potential impacts on human health were reviewed recently by Campos-Vega et al.(37). Peas, like other pulses, contain a variety of phytochemicals, including phenolic compounds, phytates, saponins and oxalates. The major phenolic constituents in pulses are tannins, phenolic acids and flavonoids(37). Phenolic compounds have been recognised for their ability to act as antioxidants and are the best characterised phytochemicals in peas. Peas contain a variety of phenolics, with the highest concentrations of most occurring in the seed coat, particularly in dark-seeded varieties(37–40). Accordingly, Xu et al.(40) determined that the antioxidant activity of pea varieties was correlated significantly with seed coat colour. Examination of the seed coat and cotyledon in two dark-coloured pea varieties revealed that the seed coat contained glycosides of quercetin, luteolin and apigenin, along with a variety of simple phenolics and proanthocyanidins. The cotyledon contained mainly hydroxybenzoic and hydroxycinnamic compounds and some of the glycosides found in the seed coat(39).

Peas contain other minor constituents which exhibit bioactivity and which may have positive benefits on human health, including saponins and phytates, which may exhibit hypcholesterolaemic and anticarcinogenic activities(37).

**Evidence for health outcomes**

Epidemiological, in vitro and interventional studies all have demonstrated the role of peas and pea constituents in maintaining metabolic, cardiovascular and gastrointestinal health in humans. Table 2 summarises the clinical evidence.

**Glycaemic response and insulin resistance**

Due to their high fibre content, peas may mediate the glycaemic response as compared with low-fibre foods with equal carbohydrate proportions. A randomised controlled study by Marinangeli et al.(41) investigated the use of whole yellow pea flour to create foods with a lower glycaemic index than comparable foods made from whole wheat flour. The results demonstrated that foods made with whole yellow pea flour reduced postprandial glucose responses in individuals and, thus, may have a role in the management of type 2 diabetes.

Marinangeli & Jones(42) compared the use of whole pea flour (WPF) and fractionated pea flour (FPF; pea hulls) on insulin resistance. WPF and FPF reduced fasting insulin levels by 13·5 and 9·8 %, respectively, compared with baseline. Homeostatic model assessment of insulin resistance (HOMA-IR), a method used to quantify insulin resistance and β-cell function, revealed that insulin resistance was reduced by 25 % in both the WPF and the FPF groups compared with the control group receiving white wheat flour. HOMA-IR showed no difference in β-cell function among groups.

A study by Seewi et al.(43) compared the use of yellow pea flour and pea starch with maize starch on glycaemic response and found a benefit with both pea flour and pea starch. Lunde et al.(44) found that bread containing 17 % pea hull fibre significantly reduced glycaemic response; however, the fibre breads also contained higher protein.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Study type</th>
<th>Study size/participants</th>
<th>Length of study</th>
<th>Treatment products</th>
<th>Control products</th>
<th>Background diet</th>
<th>Percentage change</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Glycaemic response and insulin resistance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Marinangeli &amp; Jones (2011)</td>
<td>Randomised, controlled clinical study</td>
<td>Twenty-three hypercholesterolaemic, overweight patients</td>
<td>28 d followed by 28 d washout periods</td>
<td>50 g carbohydrate from WPF or 50 g FPF</td>
<td>50 g carbohydrate from white wheat flour</td>
<td>NCEP-Step 1 diet, energy intake adjusted based on individual RMR so participants did not gain or lose weight</td>
<td>WPF: 13·5 % reduction in fasting insulin and 25 % reduction in insulin resistance (HOMA-IR) FPF: 9·8 % reduction in fasting insulin and 25 % reduction in insulin resistance (HOMA-IR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marinangeli et al. (2009)</td>
<td>Randomised, controlled cross-over clinical study</td>
<td>Twenty-two healthy patients</td>
<td>1 d</td>
<td>50 g carbohydrate from whole yellow pea flour in banana bread (100 %), biscotti (100 %) and pasta (30 %)</td>
<td>50 g carbohydrate from whole wheat flour in banana bread (100 %), biscotti (100 %) and pasta (100 %)</td>
<td>No change to normal background diet</td>
<td>Banana bread: 61·9 % reduction in IAUC Biscotti: 55·1 % reduction in IAUC Pasta: 43·1 % increase in IAUC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seewi et al. (1999)</td>
<td>Randomised, controlled clinical study</td>
<td>Ten healthy patients</td>
<td>1 d</td>
<td>30 g carbohydrate from pea starch dissolved in 500 ml cold tap water</td>
<td>30 g carbohydrate from maize starch preparations dissolved in 500 ml cold tap water</td>
<td>No change to normal background diet</td>
<td>Pea starch: 47 % reduction in post-meal glucose, 54 % reduction in serum insulin, and 37 % reduction in C-peptide responses</td>
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<td><strong>Cardiovascular health</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sandström et al. (1994)</td>
<td>Randomised, controlled cross-over clinical study</td>
<td>Eight healthy male patients</td>
<td>2-d treatment period with 2-week washout where patients consumed their habitual diets</td>
<td>7·4 g pea fibre product added to breakfast and 9-3 g pea fibre product added to the following lunch baked into bread</td>
<td>Low-fibre diet matched for energy content and macronutrient distribution</td>
<td>Diet matched for macronutrient distribution: 37 % energy from fat, 14 % from protein and 49 % from carbohydrate</td>
<td>Pea fibre: trend to lower postprandial TAG ($P&lt;0·01$); no change in fasting lipid profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad et al. (2010)</td>
<td>Randomised, controlled clinical study</td>
<td>Twenty patients with moderately elevated cholesterol</td>
<td>Six, 2-week treatment periods, each separated by a 2-week washout</td>
<td>50 g carbohydrate from green peas, cowpeas, mung beans, poli sitao, chickpeas, groundnuts, pigeon peas or kidney beans</td>
<td>Individuals served as their own controls</td>
<td>No change to normal background diet (foods were recorded during the experimental period)</td>
<td>Pea product: no significant reduction in total or LDL-cholesterol levels</td>
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<td><strong>Gastrointestinal health</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dahl et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Controlled clinical study</td>
<td>114 elderly patients</td>
<td>4-week baseline followed by 6-week treatment period</td>
<td>4 g pea hull fibre added to foods</td>
<td>Foods without added fibre</td>
<td>Daily menu administered by long-term care institution for the elderly</td>
<td>Pea fibre: 7·5 % increase in bowel movement frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flogan &amp; Dahl (2010)</td>
<td>Randomised, controlled cross-over clinical study</td>
<td>Thirteen paediatric patients with a history of constipation and/or abdominal pain in the past 12 months</td>
<td>3-week treatment, 3-week placebo period</td>
<td>5 g of insulin, two servings of study snacks with 1·4–3·4 g added pea hull fibre</td>
<td>5 g of maltodextrin and two servings of study snacks without added fibre</td>
<td>No change to normal background diet (3 d food intake records were taken for each 3-week period)</td>
<td>Pea fibre: 24 % increase in bowel movement frequency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cardiovascular health

Fibre-rich diets have been shown to lower blood pressure, improve serum lipid levels and reduce indicators of inflammation (45). Sandstro¨m et al. (46) investigated the effect of fibre preparations made from pea cell wall fibre on cardiovascular health. Subjects placed on the pea fibre diet showed a trend for lower postprandial TAG responses compared with subjects on a low-fibre diet matched in macronutrient content. However, no changes were seen in fasting lipid concentrations. In a randomised, cross-over intervention study, Trinidad et al. (30) found no differences in serum total, LDL- or HDL-cholesterol after 2 weeks of consumption of cooked, cooled peas. The failure to affect serum cholesterol may have been due to the short length of follow-up (2 weeks). Other studies of mixed legume diets have demonstrated significant improvements in markers of cardiovascular health (20,47,48).

Weight management

The impacts of a hypoenergetic diet rich in various legumes have been investigated (20,47). However, little research relating pea intake to weight control has been undertaken. Lang et al. (49) showed no effect of pea protein on satiety, 24 h energy or macronutrient intakes, or on postprandial plasma glucose and insulin concentrations when compared with egg albumin, casein, gelatin, soya protein and wheat gluten. Lunde et al. (44) found that pea fibre-enriched bread increased duration of satiety, when compared with intake of regular bread. Research is needed to understand how peas specifically may influence weight management, with body weight, BMI or waist circumference as primary endpoints.

Gastrointestinal function and homeostasis

The effects of peas and pea fractions on gastrointestinal function and symptoms have been investigated (52). In residents of a long-term care facility, particularly in those with the lowest frequency, Veenstra et al. (50) demonstrated that the addition of 4 g pea hull fibre per d resulted in a significant increase in bowel movement frequency, with no adverse symptoms. Comparing pea and chickpea fibre supplements, Flogan & Dahl (51) showed that the addition of pea hull fibre to snack foods, in combination with an inulin fibre supplement, provided to children with constipation significantly increased bowel movement frequency; no adverse symptoms were reported. Veenstra et al. (2010) (52) investigated the effect of consuming 100 g dry weight of peas per d for 4 weeks and found that pea fibre-enriched bread had no significant increase in bowel movement frequency or perceived flatulence, bloating and intestinal discomfort compared with potatoes or other pulses. Seewi et al. (43) compared the use of yellow pea flour and pea starch and found that pea starch caused less flatulence in study participants and was more tolerable than pea flour. Although peas contain starch and fermentable oligosaccharides as well as resistant starch, and fermentable fibre, limited research has been carried out on the effects of consumption of peas and pea fractions on gastrointestinal microbiota and markers of cardiovascular health.
related health outcomes. Peas proteins often undergo spontaneous glycosylation during storage and processing due to the high concentration of lysine. A study by Swiatecka et al. demonstrated that glycosylated pea proteins may escape enzymic breakdown early in the small intestine and may have an impact on the homeostasis of the large intestine by modulating the activity of the microbiota. Dominika et al. used human gastrointestinal tract simulators to predict the effects of glycosylated pea proteins on intestinal bacteria. Results of the study demonstrated a significant increase in autochthonous bacteria (Bacteroides, Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium) and a subsequent increase in their metabolic activity and production of SCFA. Researchers concluded that pea proteins could be used to improve intestinal microbiota homeostasis. Research is needed to explore the potential impacts of consumption of peas and pea fractions on gastrointestinal microbiota and wellness.

Antioxidant activity

Phenolic compounds are considered natural antioxidants that may help protect against diseases such as cancer and various inflammatory-related diseases. Dueñas et al. confirmed the presence of phenolic compounds in the seed coat and cotyledon of peas. A study by Troszynska & Ciska compared the phenolic composition and antioxidant activity of white and coloured peas. Phenolic acids were found in both free and esterified form in both white and coloured peats, but higher concentrations were seen in the coloured varieties. Condensed tannins, which have been shown to have very high antioxidant activity, were detected only in the coloured seed coats. The phenolic compounds were extracted with acetone and methanol, and the liposome system was used to measure antioxidant activity via the extent of peroxidation of phosphatidyl choline. The antioxidant activity in the acetone extract from the coloured seed coats was significantly higher than in the white coat extract. These properties were slightly altered by cooking the seeds for 30, 60 or 90 min. More research should be done to investigate the heat stability of polyphenols in peas.

Current research on the antioxidant activity of peas is limited to in vitro studies. Intervention studies are needed to investigate the efficiency of pea antioxidant activity in providing health benefits to humans.

Limitations of current knowledge and future directions

Current research on the health benefits of peas does not adequately address long-term consumption. Future studies should address the differences between acute and chronic consumption. There is also a lack of long-term studies with large, diverse (ethnicity, sex, age, etc.) subject populations.

Currently there is limited understanding of how food processing methods affect the physiochemical properties of peas, as well as a need for research looking at the effects of various pea fractions (i.e. fibre, protein, starch) on relevant health outcomes. In addition, further research is needed to identify whether different genotypes of peas are more effective in achieving the specific health benefits discussed in the present paper.

Summary

The present review briefly describes the nutritional characteristics of peas, along with demonstrated and potential health benefits associated with their consumption. Although some health benefits, such as improved gastrointestinal function and reduced glycaemic index, have been documented, others require further research.

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References

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