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**KEEPING PULSES CLOSE TO THE HEART**

Australia’s dietary shortcomings are costing the country more than $2 billion per year in medical and associated expenses, prompting researchers and dieticians to search for healthier food alternatives to improve Australia’s health score card.

One food which has proved its health benefits over a two decade US study is chickpea and this could catapult WA chickpea growers into the midst of a health food marketing boom. WA produces 25,000 tonnes of chickpea per year.

Nancy Longnecker of WA’s Centre for Legumes in Mediterranean Agriculture (CLIMA) is co-ordinating efforts to better understand the nutritional and health qualities of chickpea.

“The US study tracked over 9600 men and women for 19 years to compare the effect of diet and found those that ate four or more serves of legumes (including chickpea) per week were 22 per cent less likely to suffer from coronary heart disease than those who ate less than one serve per week,” Dr Longnecker said.

“Researchers around the world are looking at legumes as a good food to assist in improving modern diets. Eating more legumes lowers the risk of heart disease, type-II diabetes and obesity."

Pulses such as chickpea are low in fat, have a low glycaemic index, high fibre, high protein and high levels of nutrients such as iron, calcium and zinc and many of the B vitamins, including niacin, thiamine and folate. This unique nutrient package means chickpeas straddle two food categories – vegetables and the protein category of meat, legumes and nuts – which makes them a low-fat food for people wanting to cut down on animal protein.

Supported by the Grains Research and Development Corporation, CLIMA, in association with collaborating researchers at the Baker Medical Research Institute and University of Tasmania, are looking at the effect of a chickpea diet on blood cholesterol.

“Coronary heart disease accounts for one in every five Australian deaths and we need to present Australians with dietary options to help curb this rate,” Dr Longnecker said.
“Pulses are available in supermarkets around the country, are inexpensive and store well in the pantry. A convenient way to boost consumption is to use chickpea hummus as a spread rather than butter.”

A CLIMA produced cookbook, *Passion for Pulses*, contains several quick, easy and tasty recipes using pulses and is available from most bookstores.

CLIMA Director, Professor Kadambot Siddique, said a focus on health research was uncovering some compelling links between pulses and human health.

“Pulses, such as WA’s million hectare lupin crop, have valuable health properties such as high fibre, complex carbohydrates, thiamine, niacin and folate content and contain carotenoids and phytoestrogens. Plus they have low glycemic index and no gluten,” he said.

“The isoflavone, genistein, is also present in high concentrations in lupin. US investigations into genistein in soybean are evaluating its potential application as a treatment for cancer and arthritis. Similar approaches in lupin research warrant immediate attention.”

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