

The Truth About Foods and Heart Disease

A healthy diet can lower your risk of heart disease. Most of us know what not to eat for a healthy heart. Cheeseburgers or donuts aren't on the healthy-heart menu for instance. High-fat foods may clog arteries and raise cholesterol. High-sodium foods like canned soups and deli meats may cause blood pressure to rise.

But what can you eat to help *prevent* heart disease? That's not always clear.

Maintain a Healthy Weight

How much you eat is just as important as what you eat. People who have too much body fat are more likely to develop heart disease. Excess weight raises blood pressure and cholesterol. It can also lead to diabetes.

If you are overweight, losing just 10 percent of your total weight will help your heart.

Avoid Unhealthy Fats

All fats are high in calories. That's not the only problem with fats. Many types contain saturated fat and trans fat. Saturated fat and trans fat may raise LDL cholesterol, the "bad" cholesterol. This can lead to a buildup of fat inside your arteries.

Fats that are solid at room temperature are high in saturated fat. Three examples are butter, lard and the hard fat along the edge of a steak. For heart health, limit all solid fats.

Choose Healthy Fats

Pure vegetable oils are liquid at room temperature. Olive, safflower, canola, soybean, peanut and corn oil are popular cooking oils. They contain different ratios of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Both fat types can have a role in heart health.

Food producers are able to change vegetable oil into a solid fat. This process is called hydrogenation. Stick margarine and shortening are made this way. Hydrogenation can create trans fats, which can raise levels of your "bad" cholesterol while lowering the "good" cholesterol. Check the ingredients to avoid hydrogenated fats.

While the fat story is complicated, you can keep it simple in your kitchen. Use olive, safflower or canola oil for cooking. Strictly limit solid fats.



Omega-3 fatty acids are a type of fat found in fish, nuts and beans. This type of fat is especially helpful in preventing heart disease. Salmon, mackerel and albacore tuna are three fish rich in omega-3s.

Go for Whole Grains

Whole grains are good for your heart. They help regulate blood pressure. Oats are particularly good for heart health. Whole-grain oats are rich in soluble fiber. Soluble fiber helps lower cholesterol.

When grocery shopping, check the Nutrition Facts to see how much fiber is in cereals, breads and other whole-grain foods. Look for at least 3 to 5 grams of fiber per serving.

Fruits and Veggies

Vegetables and fruits are high in nutrients we usually don't get enough of. These nutrients include folate, potassium, magnesium, fiber, and vitamins A, C and K. Eating enough fruits and vegetables helps lower cholesterol and manage blood pressure. Frozen fruits and veggies offer the same benefits as fresh. Canned versions may be too high in salt or sugar. Read labels before buying.

The USDA's My Plate program tells people to "Make half your plate fruits and vegetables". This is a practical way to ensure you're eating enough produce.

Adding vegetables and fruits in your diet isn't hard:

- Keep trimmed vegetables in the fridge for quick snacks.
- Keep fruit in a bowl on the kitchen table so that you'll remember to eat some.
- Enjoy a big salad every day.

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Beans, Peas and Nuts

Beans are a tasty, inexpensive source of protein. They're also high in fiber, low in fat and rich in B vitamins and minerals. The fiber in beans is mostly heart-healthy soluble fiber.

Beans are important not just for what they bring to the plate. It's what they replace that counts. If you eat more beans you're likely to eat less meat. And that's good for your heart.

Canned beans are a great convenience food. They're as nutritious as dried beans, except for the salt added during canning. Check the Nutrition Facts when buying beans. Choose brands with less than 200 milligrams sodium per serving. Rinse beans well to remove excess salt before adding to recipes.

Nuts provide good fats including beneficial omega-3 fatty acids. Walnuts contain a special type of omega-3 that may help prevent sudden, fatal heart attacks. Along with their healthy fats, nuts offer protein, fiber, minerals, vitamins and calories. Lots of calories. A half-cup of almonds, for instance, contains 400 calories. Enjoy nuts in moderation.

Fish

Seafood is a source of healthy protein. Why? It doesn't have the saturated fat of red meat. And the fat that's in seafood is the kind you want to eat because it includes omega-3 fatty acids. These good fats may help:

- Raise levels of "good" HDL cholesterol.
- Reduce levels of triglycerides, blood fats that raise the risk of heart disease and diabetes.
- Reduce the tendency of blood to form clots that can clog veins.
- Help prevent abnormal heart rhythms, which can lead to sudden fatal heart attack.

The American Heart Association recommends eating fish, particularly fatty fish like salmon or mackerel, at least twice every week. Enjoy it steamed, roasted or grilled, but never fried.

Cut Back on Salt

The American diet is too salty. The average daily sodium intake is more than 3,400 milligrams per person, more than double the 1,500 milligrams per day recommended by the American Heart Association.

Smart cooks know they can rely on more than plain old salt to make foods taste good. They start by reading the Nutrition Facts labels on any prepared foods they buy. Many staple ingredients are now available in low-sodium versions. In the kitchen, they add chopped fresh herbs to enhance the flavor of sauces and grilled poultry or fish. A squeeze of lemon juice will accent the flavor of vegetables.

Many processed and prepared foods are very salty. Canned foods, frozen meals, snack foods, deli meats and cheese can all be high in sodium. Check food labels carefully. Cook from scratch as often as you can.

Look for the Heart-Check Mark

The Heart-Check mark makes it easy to spot heart-healthy foods in the grocery store or when dining out. Look for the American Heart Association logo along with an icon of a red heart with a white check mark. When you spot the Heart-Check mark, you'll know the food meets the Association's strict guidelines.



What you eat will have a direct impact on your heart health. Remember to:

- Cook with heart-healthy oils including olive, canola and safflower oil.
- Include whole grains in your diet.
- Make sure half of your plate has a variety of fruits and vegetables.
- Work beans into your menus for added protein and fiber.
- Enjoy some nuts as a snack
- Eat seafood twice per week.
- Cook with herbs and other fresh seasonings to keep sodium low.

Enjoy your heart-healthy meals!

Resource:

American Heart Association www.heart.org