

HEART AND NUTRITION: What is a heart-healthy diet?



Heat disease is the leading killer of men and women—and claims more lives than all forms of cancer combined. Being diagnosed with cardiovascular disease can also take an emotional toll, affecting your mood, outlook, and quality of life. While weight control and regular exercise are critical for keeping your heart in shape, the food you eat can matter just as much. In fact, along with other healthy lifestyle choices, a heart-healthy diet may reduce your risk of heart disease or stroke by 80%.

No single food can make you magically healthy, so your overall dietary pattern is more important than specific foods. Instead of fried, processed food, packaged meals, and sugary snacks, a heart-healthy diet is built around “real,” natural food—fresh from the ground, ocean, or farm.

Whether you’re looking to improve your cardiovascular health, have already been diagnosed with heart disease, or have high cholesterol or high blood pressure, these heart-healthy diet tips can help you better manage these conditions and lower your risk of a heart attack.

Three keys to a heart-healthy diet

1. Be smart about fats

If you are concerned about your heart health, rather than avoiding fat in your diet, try **replacing unhealthy fats with good fats**. Some of the most important improvements you can make to your diet are to:

Cut out trans fats. As well as raising your LDL, or “bad” cholesterol level, which can increase your risk for heart attack and stroke, trans fat also lowers your levels of HDL or “good” cholesterol, which can put you at increased

Switching to a Heart-Healthy diet

Eat More

Healthy fats, such as raw nuts, olive oil, fish oils, flaxseeds, and avocados

Colorful fruits and vegetables—fresh or frozen

High-fiber cereals, breads, and pasta made from whole grains or legumes

High-quality protein, such as fish and poultry

Organic dairy such as eggs, skim milk, or unsweetened yogurt

Eat Less

Trans fats from partially hydrogenated or deep-fried foods; saturated fats from fried food, fast food, and snack foods

Packaged foods, especially those high in sodium and sugar

White or egg breads, sugary cereals, refined pastas or rice

Processed meat such as bacon, sausage, and salami, and fried chicken

Yogurt with added sugar; processed cheese

cardiovascular risk. Trans fats are found in foods such as commercially-baked goods, fried food, and anything with “partially hydrogenated” oil in the ingredients, even if it claims to be “trans fat-free.”

Limit saturated fats. Saturated fats are mainly found in tropical oils, dairy, and red meat and should be limited to no more than 10% of your daily calorie intake. Enjoy dairy in moderation and vary the protein sources in your diet, opting for fish, skinless chicken, eggs, and vegetarian sources of protein where you can.

Eat more healthy fats. Eating foods rich in monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fat can improve blood cholesterol levels and lower your risk of heart disease. Eat omega 3 fatty acids every day, from fatty fish such as salmon, trout, or herring, or from flaxseed, kale, spinach, or walnuts. Other sources of healthy fats include olive oil, avocados, nuts, and nut butters.



2. Don't replace fat with sugar or refined carbs

When cutting back on heart-risky foods, such as unhealthy fats, it's important to replace them with healthy alternatives. Replacing processed meats with fish and/or chicken, for example, can make a positive difference to your health. But switching animal fats for **refined carbohydrates**, though—such as replacing your breakfast bacon with a donut or sugary cereal—won't do anything to lower your risk for cardiovascular disease.

Your body doesn't need any added sugar—it gets all it needs from the sugar that naturally occurs in food. Sugary food and refined carbs just add up to a lot of empty calories that are as bad for your heart as they are for your waistline. Instead of sugary soft drinks, white bread, pasta and processed foods like pizza, opt for unrefined whole grains like whole wheat or multigrain bread, brown rice, barley, quinoa, bran cereal, oatmeal, and non-starchy vegetables.

3. Focus on high-fiber food

A diet **high in fiber** can lower “bad” cholesterol and provide nutrients that help protect against heart disease. As an added bonus, it may also help you to lose weight. Since fiber stays in the stomach longer than other foods, the feeling of fullness will stay with you much longer, helping you eat less. Fiber also

The DASH diet for lowering blood pressure

The Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension, or DASH diet, is a specially designed eating plan to help you lower your blood pressure, which is a major cause of hypertension and stroke. When combined with a reduction in salt, the DASH diet can be more effective at lowering blood pressure than medication.

moves fat through your digestive system quicker so less of it is absorbed. And when you fill up on fiber you'll also have more energy for exercising.

Insoluble fiber is found in whole grains, wheat cereals, and vegetables such as carrots, celery, and tomatoes.

Soluble fiber sources include barley, oatmeal, beans, nuts, and fruits such as apples, berries, citrus fruits, and pears.

Steer clear of salt and processed foods

Eating a lot of salt can contribute to high blood pressure, which is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease. The American Heart Association recommends no more than a teaspoon of salt a day for an adult. That may sound alarmingly small, but there are actually many painless—even delicious—ways to reduce your sodium intake.

Reduce canned or processed foods. Much of the salt you eat comes from canned or processed foods like soups or frozen dinners—even poultry or other meats often have salt added during processing. Eating fresh foods, looking for unsalted meats, and making your own soups or stews can dramatically reduce your sodium intake.

Use spices for flavor. Cooking for yourself enables you to have more control over your salt intake. Make use of the many delicious alternatives to salt. Try fresh herbs like basil, thyme, or chives. In the dried spices aisle, you can find alternatives such as allspice, bay leaves, or cumin to flavor your meal without sodium.

Substitute reduced sodium versions, or salt substitutes.

Choose your condiments and packaged foods carefully, looking for foods labeled sodium free, low sodium, or unsalted. Better yet, use fresh ingredients and cook without salt.

Rekindle home cooking

It's difficult to eat a heart-healthy diet when you're eating out a lot, ordering in, or eating microwave dinners and other processed foods. The portions are usually too large and the meals contain too much salt, sugar, and unhealthy fat. Cooking at home will give you better control over the nutritional content of your meals and can also help you to save money and lose weight. Making heart-healthy meals is easier and less time-consuming than you may think—and you don't have to be an experienced cook to master some quick and wholesome meals.

Get the whole family involved. Trade off shopping and cleanup duties with your spouse or get the kids to help shop for groceries and prepare dinner. **Kids find it fun to eat what they've helped** to make and cooking together is a great way to expand the pallets of picky eaters.

For more on preparing your own heart-healthy meals, see [Cooking at Home](#).

Make cooking fun. If you hate the idea of spending time in the kitchen, you need to embrace your fun side. Try singing along to your favorite music as you cook, sip a glass of wine, or listen to the radio or an audiobook.

Make foods ready-to-eat. You're more likely to stay heart-healthy during your busy week if you make healthy foods easily accessible. When you come home from grocery shopping, cut up vegetables and fruit and store them in the fridge, ready for the next meal or when you are looking for a quick snack.

Use heart healthy cooking methods. Just as important as choosing healthy ingredients is preparing them in healthy ways. You can bake, broil, roast, steam, poach, lightly stir fry, or sauté ingredients—using a small amount of olive oil, reduced sodium broth, and spices instead of salt.



Understand serving sizes. A serving size is a specific amount of food, defined by common measurements such as cups, ounces, or pieces—and a healthy serving size may be a lot smaller than you're used to. The recommended serving size for pasta is $\frac{1}{2}$ cup, while a serving of meat, fish, or chicken is 2 to 3 ounces (57-85 grams). Judging serving size is a learned skill, so you may initially need to use measuring cups, spoons, and a food scale to help.

Eyeball it. Once you have a better idea of what a serving should be, you can estimate your portion. You can use common objects for reference; for example, a serving of pasta should be about the size of a baseball (slightly smaller than a cricket ball), while a serving of meat, fish, or chicken is about the size of a deck of cards.

If you're still hungry at the end of a meal fill up on extra servings of vegetables or fruit.

Beware of restaurant portions. They're often more than anyone needs. Order an appetizer instead of an entrée, split an entrée with your dining companion, or take half your meal home for tomorrow's lunch.



Cook just once or twice a week and make meals for the whole week. Cook a large batch of heart healthy food and reheat leftovers the rest of the week. Or freeze meals in individual portions for those days when you don't have time to cook.

Control portion size—and your weight

Carrying excess weight means that your heart must work harder, and this often leads to high blood pressure—a major cause of heart disease. As well as eating less sugar, salt, unhealthy fats and reducing portion sizes is a crucial step toward **losing and/or maintaining a healthy weight.**

