

# Eating Well For Your Heart

The most important thing to remember as you consider changing your eating habits is that the *overall way foods fit into your diet is what counts*. No single food, beverage or dietary supplement will make or break your health. It is the way these foods fit together as a whole that matters most. The basis of an eating plan that will protect your heart and blood vessels is this: healthy choices prepared in healthy ways eaten in appropriate amounts.

Diets high in saturated fat, *trans* fats, cholesterol and sodium (salt) while low in dietary fiber, fruits and vegetables can increase your risk of heart and vascular disease, cancer, obesity and other health problems. Read on for tips to change your diet to protect your health.

**Limit saturated fats and cholesterol:** these come mainly from animal products

- Eat more meatless meals. Rely on beans, lentils or soy as a protein source.
- Limit meat, poultry and fish to 5-6 cooked ounces per day.
- Choose lean meats: white meat poultry without skin, beef or pork from the loin or round; fish (unbreaded); venison (deer meat) are good examples. These cuts should be well-trimmed of visible fat.
- Limit egg yolks to 2-4 per week.
- Choose non-fat or low-fat dairy products (skim, ½% or 1% milk and fat-free or low-fat yogurt and cheese).
- Use monounsaturated fats (canola oil, olive oil, avocado, unsalted nuts) in place of highly saturated fats (meat fat, butter, etc.).

**Limit trans fatty acids:** also known as “partially hydrogenated fats” and are produced when a liquid oil is hardened into a more solid form

- Choose tub or squeeze margarine instead of stick. Use liquid oil instead of stick margarine, butter or shortening. Choose a low-fat tub margarine that is labeled "no *trans* fats".
- Limit portions of snack foods made with partially hydrogenated fats (read the ingredient list).
- Limit fried foods.
- Choose products that have “0g” listed next to *trans* fats on the food label.
- Wherever possible, choose foods that do not have “partially hydrogenated fats” listed as an ingredient.

**Sodium:** A recommended amount of sodium per day is 2300 mg or less. Limiting sodium in foods may help put less stress on your kidneys and heart, and also help lower your blood pressure. Talk with your doctor or a registered dietitian about whether limiting sodium is important for you; each individual is different.

- Eat more fresh foods.
- Season your foods with herbs, spices, pepper, vinegar or lemon juice.
- Limit added salt.
- Limit regular canned and processed foods.
- Read food labels and choose products with less than 140 mg sodium per serving.

**Phytochemicals:** these occur naturally in foods, especially fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and play a crucial role in helping to prevent heart disease and cancer.

- Aim for 3 to 5 servings of vegetables each day.  
[one serving = ½ cup chopped vegetables or vegetable juice; 1 cup raw green leafy vegetable]
- Aim for 2 to 4 servings of fruit each day.  
[one serving = ½ cup cut fresh, frozen or canned fruit or fruit juice]
- Strive for 3 servings of whole grain foods per day.  
[Examples: barley, whole wheat, oatmeal, oat bran, wild grain or brown rice, cracked wheat]

**Antioxidants:** our body's defense against the ongoing “damage” caused by free radicals which are always present in our bodies. Studies show that eating foods high in antioxidants decreases the risk of heart disease and cancer.

- Focus on a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

**Flavonoids:** a type of antioxidant found in tea, red grapes, grape juice, red wine, dark chocolate as well as many fruits and vegetables that helps to prevent the process that leads to the build-up of fat and cholesterol in the arteries, helps prevent blood clots and may be involved in prevention of some cancers.

If you do not drink alcohol, you should not start. Men should limit their alcohol intake to no more than 2 drinks per day. Women should limit their alcohol intake to no more than 4 drinks per week. 1 "alcoholic drink" serving = 4 - 5 ounces wine, 1 ½ ounce distilled alcohol or 12 ounces beer.

**Omega-3 fatty acids:** these are found in fatty fish, flaxseed oil, canola oil and soybean oil. The benefits of omega-3's are many:

- Reduce the risk of sudden cardiac death
- Reduce the risk of cardiac arrhythmias (abnormal heart rhythm)
- Slow or prevent atherosclerosis progression (cholesterol plaque build-up on artery walls)
- Reduce blood pressure
- Reduce triglycerides (blood fats)
- Reduce inflammation
- Reduce risk of blood clot formation

Aim for at least two servings of cold-water, fatty fish per week. Good sources include salmon, tuna, herring, mackerel, sardines, trout, anchovies, and halibut. Include ground flaxseed or flaxseed oil into your diet.

**Increase the folic acid in your diet:** high blood levels of the amino acid homocysteine have been linked to an increased risk of heart and vascular disease. B vitamins, especially folic acid, are important in the breakdown of homocysteine. Adequate folic acid is important for women of child bearing age to reduce the risk of having a child with spina bifida.

- Good sources: orange juice, green leafy vegetables, dry beans, lentils, whole grains, fortified cereals.

- Yet another reason to eat more fruit, vegetables and whole grains.
- Most multivitamins provide the recommended 400 mcg of folic acid.

**Increase your dietary fiber** gradually with a goal of 25-30 grams/day. Emphasize foods rich in soluble fiber to help lower blood cholesterol levels. For a healthy digestive system and for cancer prevention increase both soluble and insoluble fiber sources.

- Good sources of soluble fiber: dry beans, lentils, barley, cooked oatmeal or oat bran, All Bran and Bran Buds cereals, Quaker ready-to-eat oatmeal squares and oat bran cereal, Kashi cereals, apples, oranges and Brussels sprouts.
- Good sources of insoluble fiber: whole wheat, wheat bran, cracked wheat, vegetables, fruits, dry beans, lentils, and wheat germ.
- Be sure to drink plenty of water when increasing your dietary fiber to prevent constipation.

**Calcium and Vitamin D:** calcium can aid in lowering blood pressure and vitamin D is necessary to absorb calcium. Each are also important in the prevention of osteoporosis (weak bones). Low vitamin D levels have recently been linked to increased risk of heart disease.

- Good sources of calcium: milk, yogurt, salmon with bones, spinach, tofu; any calcium fortified foods, such as, cereals, cereal bars, orange juice and cottage cheese.
- Best vitamin D sources: vitamin D fortified milk, sunlight or vitamin D found in a calcium supplement or multivitamin with mineral supplement.

**Plant stanols and Sterols:** these are naturally-occurring substances that can help to lower your cholesterol levels by blocking cholesterol absorption in the digestive tract. Products containing these substances are appearing on food shelves on a regular basis; tub margarine such as Benecol™ or Take Control™ have stood the test of time and require 2-3 daily servings for significant cholesterol-lowering benefit.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Healthy eating goes well beyond restricting fat. We are surrounded by fat-free foods, but unfortunately they may also be nutrient-free. Although it is important to limit saturated fat, cholesterol and *trans* fatty acids, we need to place just as much emphasis on getting enough of the protective foods which provide strong health benefits for disease prevention. Also vital is combining a good eating style with exercise. Aim for 30 to 60 minutes of aerobic exercise on most, if not all, days of the week.