

Heart Healthy Foods



According to the Centers for Disease Control, heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States and a major cause of disability. Unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles are contributing factors to the number of Americans affected by heart disease.

Being physically active and eating healthy foods are keys to decreasing one's risk of developing heart disease. Whatever changes are made, it is imperative that they *be sustainable for a true lifestyle change*. In previous months, we encouraged patients to take strides in becoming more physically fit. This month's article is dedicated to learning more about heart healthy foods.

When discussing heart healthy foods, it is important to understand the different types of fats and how they influence your cholesterol levels. Athero-



sclerosis has been linked to diets high in saturated and trans fats. A simple way to reduce total and bad cholesterol levels (LDL) is to decrease the amount of saturated and trans fats in one's diet. In other words, limit the amount of solid fats you consume. This includes butter, margarine, lard, and shortening—which are often found in pastries, fried foods, and potato

chips. On the other hand, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are known to help improve cholesterol levels. When preparing meals, use monounsaturated fats, such as canola or olive oil. Polyunsaturated fats are found in nuts and seeds.

Omega-3 fatty acids are considered heart healthy. Omega-3 fatty acids decrease triglyceride levels, lower blood pressure, and help decrease one's overall risk of heart disease. Fish, such as salmon, mackerel, lake trout, and sardines, are a great source of omega-3 fatty acids. As such, the American Heart Association recommends two servings of fish high in omega-3 fatty acids per week.

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Heart Healthy Foods (continued)

Flaxseeds are another source of omega-3 fatty acids. Flaxseeds are a rich source of alpha-linolenic acid which is the chemical precursor to omega-3 fatty acids. They have also been shown to help reduce bad cholesterol (LDL).

Nuts, such as almonds and walnuts, are also generally good for your health. They are a good, low fat protein source, high in omega-3 fatty acids, and unsaturated fat. Nuts are also rich in arginine which is the precursor to nitric oxide. Nitric oxide, moreover, inhibits platelet aggregation and adhesion. In other words, it helps prevent the formation of blood clots (and thus decreases the likelihood of clots forming that would impede cardiac blood flow).

A diet high in fruit and vegetables is considered heart healthy. Fresh fruit

and vegetables are low in calories and high in dietary soluble fiber. They are also rich in antioxidants and vitamins. Avoid processed and canned fruits and vegetables; the sugar/syrup and salt content are prohibitively high.



When choosing your fresh produce, remember that the most colorful fruits and vegetables usually have the most nutritious value. Citrus and dark green vegetables are high in Vitamin C. Recent studies also suggest that people who have 4+ servings of fruits and vegetables high in beta carotene (orange carrots, yellow squash) have a reduced risk of developing coronary artery disease. Of note, blueberries have been shown to have the highest an-

tiioxidant capacity among all fruits and vegetables.

Sources of whole grains and soluble fiber have also been shown to improve blood pressures and decrease total cholesterol levels. Whole grains are a great source of thiamine and riboflavin. When choosing breads, pasta, or rice, choose 100% whole grain items instead of processed white bread, rice, or pasta.

B-complex vitamins, found in whole grain cereals, chicken, dairy, and dark green leafy vegetables, have been shown to reduce homocysteine levels. Niacin, moreover, helps increase good cholesterol levels (HDL). Foods rich in calcium and potassium, such as oatmeal, spinach, broccoli, tofu, and oranges, can also help improve one's blood pressure.

With a heart healthy diet, it is also important to cut back on foods with high calories and little nutritional value. Alcoholic beverages, chips, and sodas, for example, should be consumed in moderation. Salt intake also needs to be limited. Patients with high blood pressure need to limit their salt intake to less than 1,500 mg a day. Also, when given the choice, select fat-free or low-fat products for consumption.

In conclusion, there are many foods that are considered heart healthy. *The American Heart Association does not recommend or endorse using vitamins, minerals, or herbal supplements to treat or prevent heart disease and stroke. **Remember to choose foods that have a proven nutritional value, and with any diet, eat in moderation.***