

February is American Heart Month

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. One in three adults has some form of heart disease. The major culprit of heart disease is high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure, and excessive weight. Many studies have shown that a healthy diet and lifestyle are the best tools to fight against heart disease. Below is a list of food components to watch out for or incorporate into your diet to protect your heart, and improve your overall health and well-being!

Limit Saturated Fat and avoid Trans Fat. Why?

High saturated and trans fat intake raises “bad” cholesterol levels (and in some cases lowers the “good” cholesterol!) and too much cholesterol in the blood builds up in the walls of the arteries. Over-time the blood flow and oxygen to the heart is slowed down or blocked due to hardening of the arteries. Watch out for foods such as fatty meats, dairy products, baked goods and deep-fried and processed foods.

Heart health tip: Switch to reduced fat, whipped, or liquid spreads instead of stick margarine or butter. (*Remember...the harder the butter, the harder it is on your heart!*)

Hold the Salt (Sodium). Why?

High sodium intake increases blood pressure levels and puts added force against the artery walls. Eventually, this extra pressure can damage the arteries by narrowing and hardening the arteries with fatty deposits. Be mindful in your consumption of processed foods and low fat food products that tend to be high in sodium. When choosing food products, use the nutrition label to check serving size, and the percent Daily Values on the right side (5% or less is low and 20% or more is high). Reduce sodium intake to less than 2,300mg per day, and for older adults over 51, reduce sodium intake to 1,500mg per day.

Heart health tip: Limit the use of mixes or “instant” products that already contain salt or additives with sodium. Use herbs, spices, garlic, onions in place of salt when cooking.

Eat Foods Containing Omega-3 Fatty Acids. Why?

There is evidence that certain foods are pro-inflammatory such as the foods of diets high in saturated fat. Inflammation in the body can damage blood vessels by narrowing or closing them off, preventing blood flow through the vessels to the heart. However, omega-3 fatty acids are a type of unsaturated fatty acid that reduces inflammation throughout the body, in addition to lowering blood pressure. Good food choices of omega-3 foods include fish (salmon, tuna, mackerel, sardines), as well as flaxseeds, walnuts, canola and soybean oil.

Heart health tip: Eat two 4-ounce portions of fatty fish each week.

Say “Yes” to fiber, especially to soluble fiber. Why?

Some research shows that these “short chains” may impact the cholesterol pathway by binding and removing cholesterol from the body. Also fiber aids in weight loss by requiring longer chewing times, early satiety, and fiber is more energy dense with fewer calories. Soluble fiber is found in oats, peas, beans, apples, citrus fruits, carrots and barley. Get 20-30 grams of fiber per day, and look for at least 3 to 5 grams of fiber per serving.



Heart health tip: Add dried beans to homemade soups or salads.

For more helpful tips, go to the [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#), including the [Heart-Healthy Cooking Tips](#) page. Remember...”Health is the thing that makes you feel that now is the best time of the year.” **So treat your heart right!**