

Heart Health & Nutrition — Eat to Beat the Odds

You have certainly heard many of these facts before, but we feel reiterating them is never enough. Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States. Think about that for a moment.

Studies among people with heart disease have shown that lowering high cholesterol and high blood pressure can reduce the risk of dying of heart disease, having a non-fatal heart attack or stroke, and needing heart bypass surgery or angioplasty. The risk for a heart attack can be reduced through nutrition and lifestyle modifications. Finally, research on nutrition and heart health proves that certain foods can reduce cholesterol and manage high blood pressure. Yes, it can be as simple as modifying your diet!

So, what are some of the things you can do today in order to reduce the risk of heart attacks and strokes, as well as manage your cholesterol?

- Reduce abdominal fat by having a waist circumference below 40 inches for men and 35 inches for women. Get out that measuring tape!
- Avoiding excessive weight gain — of course, you already know this.
- Balance calorie expenditure and intake through regular exercise and food portion control. The math is very simple. If you consume more calories than you use, you'll gain weight. And vice versa.
- Exercise daily. This will help raise HDL — the healthy cholesterol.
- Do not smoke! If you smoke, start on a quitting program today. No excuses.
- Incorporate 5-10 servings of fruits and vegetables per day rich in antioxidants. These include raspberries, blueberries and tomatoes.
- Do not consume any trans fats — typically found in processed foods with a long shelf life. Toss out anything that comes in a package!
- Consume a minimum of 25g of (soluble) fiber per day. Fiber helps bind to the bile acids in the blood stream, therefore “eating” away the bad cholesterol.
- Consume whole grains and avoid processed and refined grains.
- Limit alcohol. It may be tough around the holiday times, but aim for no more than one glass of wine per day.
- Get assessed — have yearly checks-ups to monitor your health. Heart-Healthy Diet

Now that you know the immediate steps you can take toward better heart health, let's delve into some important details. One of the best things you can do for your heart is eating a heart-friendly diet.

The Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan is a heart-healthy eating plan that can help protect your heart. Following the DASH diet means eating foods that are low in fat, cholesterol and salt. The diet is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products that can help protect your heart. Legumes, low-fat sources of protein and certain types of fish also can reduce your risk of heart disease.

Limit Certain Fats

- Different types of fats include saturated, polyunsaturated, monounsaturated and trans fat.
- Saturated fats and trans fats increase the risk of coronary artery disease by raising blood cholesterol levels.
- Major sources of saturated fat include non-lean beef, butter, cheese, milk, and coconut and palm oils.
- There's growing evidence that trans fat may be worse than saturated fat because unlike saturated fat, trans fat both raises your low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or "bad," cholesterol, and lowers your high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or "good," cholesterol.
- Sources of trans fat include some deep-fried fast foods, bakery products, packaged snack foods, margarines and crackers. Look at the label for the term "partially hydrogenated" to avoid trans fat.

The Good Fat — Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Not all fat is evil. There is a type of polyunsaturated fat which may decrease your risk of heart attack, protect against irregular heartbeats and lower blood pressure. It's called the Omega-3 fatty acid. Some fish are a good natural source of Omega-3s.

What Can High-Omega-3 Foods Do For You?

- Reduce inflammation throughout your body.
- Keep your blood from clotting excessively.
- Maintain the fluidity of your cell membranes.
- Lower the amount of lipids (fats such as cholesterol and triglycerides) circulating in the bloodstream.
- Decrease platelet aggregation, preventing excessive blood clotting.
- Inhibit thickening of the arteries by decreasing endothelial cells' production of a platelet-derived growth factor (the lining of the arteries is composed of endothelial cells).

- Increase the activity of another chemical derived from endothelial cells (endothelium-derived nitric oxide), which causes arteries to relax and dilate.
- Reduce the production of messenger chemicals called cytokines, which are involved in the inflammatory response associated with atherosclerosis.
- Reduce the risk of becoming obese and improve the body's ability to respond to insulin by stimulating the secretion of leptin, a hormone that helps regulate food intake, body weight and metabolism, and is expressed primarily by adipocytes (fat cells).
- Help prevent cancer cell growth. (For more information on preventing cancer, see our related cancer article.)

Great sources of Omega-3 fatty acids include flax seeds, walnuts and salmon. Other foods, such as soybeans, halibut, shrimp, tofu, and winter squash are also good sources of this healthy fat.

Keep in mind that pregnant women and women of childbearing age should avoid shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish, because they contain levels of mercury high enough to pose a danger to a developing fetus. For most others, the health benefits of fish outweigh any risks associated with mercury. Omega-3s are present in smaller amounts in flaxseed oil, walnut oil, soybean oil and canola oil, and they can also be found in supplements.

In order to have a healthy heart and live a longer life, we need to consume more naturally-prepared, hormone-free, lean foods, including fruits and vegetables. Decreasing the intake of unhealthy fats and increasing the consumption of healthful Omega-3 fats also aids in promoting heart health, while decrease the risk of heart attacks and strokes.

For more information out heart health, please visit the American Heart Association at www.americanheart.org.

Supplementation

The best prescription for heart health is a healthy diet and regular exercise. But, research has also shown that those who eat right, exercise and use supplementation have better results than those who do not use supplements. The supplements listed below are recommended in addition to a heart healthy diet. Make sure they are manufactured by a company with NPA's certification for good manufacturing practices. Additional supplements may be recommended by your doctor.

Krill or Fish oil - essential source of omega 3 fatty acids
 Gender Specific Multivitamin
 Ubiquinol or CoQ10
 Super Greens and/or Resveratrol