Heart Healthy Eating

How can heart healthy eating help prevent heart disease?

What you eat is important to the health of your heart. The foods you choose can help prevent and manage high blood pressure, cholesterol, triglyceride, and blood sugar (glucose) levels. These high levels can increase your risk of heart disease, especially if you have more than one.

Healthy eating, being physically active, reaching and maintaining a healthy body weight, and not smoking are the best lifestyle approaches you can take to prevent heart disease.

Focus on eating foods that protect heart health - fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and healthy fats - and limiting foods that are harmful to heart health. This will have a greater benefit than simply avoiding a few foods.

What foods do I eat?

Eat more plant foods: vegetables and fruit, whole grains, legumes (beans, peas and lentils), nuts, and seeds. These foods have vitamins and minerals, fibre, and phytochemicals that will help keep your heart healthy. The Mediterranean diet is one example of a plant-based heart healthy eating pattern.

Vegetables and fruit

Eat 7 to 10 servings of vegetables and fruit every day. Choose from a wide variety of types and colours, including bananas, berries, broccoli, carrots, kale, oranges, spinach, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes. Whole fruit is healthier than fruit juice. One serving is 120 mL (½ cup) of fresh or frozen vegetables, 250 mL (1 cup) of raw leafy greens, or 1 medium piece of fruit.

To increase your vegetables and fruit:
- Include a fruit or vegetable at breakfast
- Plan for at least 2 servings of vegetables or fruit at both lunch and dinner
- Add extra vegetables to pasta, salads, sandwiches, sauces, soups, stews, and stir-fries

Whole grains

Eat 3 or more servings of whole grains each day. Whole grains include:
- Whole grain wheat, rye, spelt, kamut, barley, oats, and bulgur

Unsalted nuts or seeds

Eat 4 to 5 servings of unsalted nuts or seeds each week. Nuts and seeds contain heart healthy unsaturated fats, fiber, vitamins, minerals and other nutrients that help to keep your heart healthy. A serving of nuts or seeds is 60 mL (1/4 cup).

Plant-based liquid oils

Use plant-based liquid oils instead of animal-based fats and tropical oils. Eating unsaturated fats from liquid vegetable oils is more beneficial to heart health than eating saturated fats from animal-based fats (e.g. butter, ghee, lard) and tropical oils (e.g. coconut and palm oil).

Liquid vegetable oils have different flavours and uses in the kitchen, but all of them can help to improve blood cholesterol levels. Use a variety of healthy plant-based oils to prepare foods, including extra virgin olive, soybean, and canola oils, as well as non-hydrogenated margarines made from these oils.

Foods with omega-3 fats

Eat foods that contain Omega-3 fats. Omega-3 fats are polyunsaturated fats found in fish and some plant foods. The types of omega-3 fats in fish are different from those found in plant foods. All types of omega-3 fats are healthy for your heart, but the fats in fish are the most beneficial.

Aim to eat at least 2 servings of fish a week. Choose fatty fish, such as herring, mackerel, salmon, sardines or trout. These fish contain higher amounts of omega-3 fats. One serving is 75 grams (2 ½ ounces).

Aim to eat more plant sources of omega-3 fats. Plant sources of omega-3 fats include chia and hemp seeds.
ground flax seeds, walnuts, soybeans, tofu, and canola oil. Use these foods to add variety to your meals and
snacks by sprinkling them on salad, cereal, and yogurt,
and by using tofu instead of meat in meat-based soups,
stir-fries, and sauces.

What foods do I limit or avoid?

Foods high in trans and saturated fats
Eating foods high in trans and saturated fats can increase
your risk of heart disease. Foods typically high in trans
fat include shortening, hard margarine, deep fried foods,
and store-bought frozen pizzas, pie crusts, cookies,
cakes, and crackers. Foods high in saturated fat are
largely animal based and include foods such as red meat,
processed meat, cheese, ice cream, cream, and whole
milk products.

To reduce foods high in trans and saturated fats:

- Look at the total number of grams of trans fat on the
  Nutrition Facts table on prepackaged foods. Choose
  foods that list “0” (zero) grams of trans fat
- Replace meat with fish or legumes such as beans, peas
  and lentils
- Take the skin off chicken, turkey, and other poultry
  before cooking
- Choose lean cuts of meat, such as round, rump, and
tenderloin. Trim any visible fat
- Use lower fat milk, yogurt, and cheese
- Choose grilled, steamed, or baked foods instead of
depth fried foods when eating out

For more information on dietary fats see HealthLinkBC
File #68f Dietary Fats and Your Health.

Refined grains and grain products
Limit low-fibre breakfast cereals, white rice, and breads,
snack foods, and baked goods made with white all-
purpose flour, enriched flour, or wheat flour. These
foods contain less of the healthful components found in
whole grains, including fibre, vitamins, minerals, and
phytochemicals.

Sugary drinks
Sugary drinks contain added sugars that provide calories
but little or no nutrition and often take the place of
healthier choices like water or milk. Sugary drinks
include pop, energy drinks, fruit drugs, sport drinks,
slushes, vitamin-enhanced waters, and specially coffee
and tea drinks.

Excess calories from all sources, including sugary drinks
can lead to weight gain. Excess body weight can
increase the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and
heart disease.

Foods high in sodium
Everyone needs some sodium, but too much can raise
blood pressure and increase the risk of heart disease.
Most adults need only 1500 mg of sodium each day. To
lower sodium in your diet:

- Eat fewer packaged, ready-to-eat and take out foods
- Limit processed meats, including deli meats, bacon,
sausages, hot dogs, and pepperoni
- Prepare your own meals using low or no sodium-
  added ingredients such as herbs and spices
- Use the % Daily Value (%DV) on the Nutrition Facts
  Table to compare products. Choose foods with 15%
  DV or less for sodium

For more ideas about ways to lower your sodium, see
HealthLinkBC File #68b Lifestyle Steps to Lower Your
High Blood Pressure.

What can I do to maintain a healthy
weight?

Maintaining a healthy weight can lower your risk of
heart disease and improve heart health.

To help you reach and maintain a healthy body weight:

- Follow the recommendations in Eating Well with
  Canada’s Food Guide around the number and size of
servings you need from each food group
- Fill half your plate with vegetables and fruit at lunch
  and dinner. See the Eat Well Plate at https://food-
guide.canada.ca/en/tips-for-healthy-eating/make-
healthy-meals-with-the-eat-well-plate/
- Be physically active every day

For More Information

- Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada
  www.heartandstroke.ca
- HealthLink BC - Mediterranean Diet
  www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/aa98646

For more nutrition information, call 8-1-1 to speak to a
registered dietitian, or visit
www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthy-eating.

For physical activity information or advice, call 8-1-1 to
speak with a qualified exercise professional, or visit
www.healthlinkbc.ca/physical-activity.