

A Heart-healthy diet

A heart-healthy diet is delicious and varied — rich in vegetables and fruits, with whole grains, high-fiber foods, lean meats and poultry, fish at least twice a week, and fat-free or 1 percent fat dairy products. By learning to make smart choices — whether you're cooking at home or eating out — you can enjoy flavorful foods while you manage your cholesterol.

Know and limit your fats.

Unsaturated fats don't contribute to your cholesterol level the way saturated and trans fats do, but you should still consume them in limited amounts.

Choose lean meats and poultry without skin and prepare them without added saturated and trans fat.

Most meats have about the same amount of cholesterol, roughly 70 milligrams in each three-ounce cooked serving (about the size of a deck of cards). The American Heart Association recommends eating no more than six ounces of cooked lean meat, poultry, fish or seafood a day.

- The leanest beef cuts usually include sirloin, chuck, loin and round. Choose "choice" or "select" grades rather than "prime." Select lean or extra lean ground meats.
- Lean pork cuts include tenderloin or loin chops.
- The leanest lamb cuts come from the leg, arm and loin.
- Remove all visible fat from meat and poultry before cooking.
- Remove skin from poultry before eating.
- Choose white meat most often when eating poultry.
- Duck and goose are higher in fat than chicken and turkey.
- Grill, bake or broil meats and poultry.
- Organ meats — such as liver, sweetbread, kidneys and brains — are very high in cholesterol.
- Cut back on processed meats that are high in saturated fat and sodium.

Eat at least two servings of fish each week.

- Fish can be fatty or lean, but it's still low in saturated fat.
- Recent research shows that eating oily fish containing omega-3 fatty acids (for example, salmon, trout and herring) may help lower your risk of death from coronary artery disease.
- Prepare fish baked, broiled, grilled or boiled rather than breaded and fried.

Select fat-free, 1 percent fat, and low-fat dairy products.

- Minimize your intake of whole-fat dairy products such as butter and whole milk or 2 percent full-fat dairy products (yogurt, cheeses).
- If you drink whole or 2 percent milk, or use full-fat dairy products, gradually switch to fat-free, low-fat or reduced-fat dairy products.
- Look for fat-free or low-fat cottage cheese, part-skim milk mozzarella, ricotta and other fat-free or low-fat cheeses.

Cut back on foods containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oils to reduce trans fat in your diet.

- Use liquid vegetable oils and soft margarines in place of hard margarine or shortening.
- Limit cakes, cookies, crackers, pastries, pies, muffins, doughnuts and French fries made with partially hydrogenated or saturated fats.

Cut back on foods high in dietary cholesterol.

- Try to eat less than 300 mg of cholesterol each day.
- Some commonly eaten cholesterol-containing foods include whole eggs (about 200 mg per yolk), shellfish (50 to 100 mg per ½ cup), “organ” meats such as liver (375 mg per 3 oz), and whole milk (30 mg per cup).
- Egg whites don't contain cholesterol and are good protein sources, so they're fine. In fact, you can substitute two egg whites for each egg yolk in many recipes that call for eggs.

Cut back on beverages and foods with added sugars.

Many snack foods and beverages have added sugars. Cut back on added sugars to lower your total calorie intake and help control your weight. These foods also tend to be low in vitamins and minerals, and the calories add up quickly. Drinking calorie-containing beverages may not make you feel full. This could tempt you to eat and drink more than you need and gain weight.

- Examples of added sugars are sucrose, glucose, fructose, maltose, dextrose, corn syrups, high-fructose corn syrup, concentrated fruit juice and honey.
- Read the ingredient list. Choose items that don't have added sugars in their first four listed ingredients.

Choose and prepare foods with little or no salt.

Foods low in salt lower your risk for high blood pressure and may help you control it. Aim to consume less than 2,300 mg of salt or sodium per day. Some people — including African Americans, middle-aged and older adults, and people with high blood pressure — should have less than 1,500 mg per day.

- Compare the sodium content of similar products (for example, different brands of tomato sauce) and choose the products with less sodium.
- Choose frozen foods, soups, cereals, baked goods and other processed foods that are labeled “reduced-sodium.”
- Limit high-sodium condiments and foods such as soy sauce, steak sauce, Worcestershire sauce, flavored seasoning salts, pickles and olives.
- Replace salt with herbs and spices or some of the salt-free seasoning mixes. Use lemon juice, citrus zest or hot chilies to add flavor.
- Try rinsing certain foods, such as canned tuna and salmon, feta cheese and capers, to remove some of the sodium.

Cholesterol, fiber and oat bran

Fiber is classified as either soluble or insoluble. When regularly eaten as part of a diet low in

saturated fat and cholesterol, soluble fiber has been shown to help lower blood cholesterol and may also help reduce the risk of diabetes and colon and rectal cancer. The American Heart Association recommends that you eat at least 25–30 grams of dietary fiber — in both soluble and insoluble forms — every day. The more calories you require to meet your daily needs, the more dietary fiber you need. Try to eat at least 14 grams of fiber per 1,000 calories you consume.

- Foods high in soluble fiber include oat bran, oatmeal, beans, peas, rice bran, barley, citrus fruits, strawberries and apple pulp.
- Foods high in insoluble fiber include whole-wheat breads, wheat cereals, wheat bran, cabbage, beets, carrots, Brussels sprouts, turnips, cauliflower and apple skin.
- Replace low-fiber foods (white bread, white rice, candy and chips) with fiber-containing foods (whole-grain bread, brown rice, fruits and vegetables).
- Try to eat more raw vegetables and fresh fruit, including the skins when appropriate. Cooking vegetables can reduce their fiber content, and skins are a good source of fiber.
- Eat high-fiber foods at every meal. Bran cereals for breakfast is a good start, but try to include some fruits, vegetables, whole-grains and beans in your diet, too.
- Be sure to increase your fiber intake gradually, giving your body time to adjust, and drink at least six to eight 8-oz. glasses of fluids a day.
- Read the Nutrition Facts label on all packaged foods that claim to contain oat bran or wheat bran. Many of these products actually contain very little fiber and may also be high in sodium, calories and saturated or trans fat.

Read labels for a healthy heart.

Make reading food labels a habit. They'll help you choose foods more wisely. Many foods have saturated fat or trans fat that can raise your cholesterol. Some may be high in sodium, which can increase blood pressure in some people. Also, watch for these key terms, and know what they mean.

- "Free" has the least amount of a nutrient.
- "Very Low" and "Low" have a little more.
- "Reduced" or "Less" always means the food has 25 percent less of that nutrient than the reference (or standard) version of the food.

The American Heart Association established its Food Certification Program to provide consumers a quick, easy way to identify heart-healthy foods that can be part of a healthful eating plan. Products certified by the American Heart Association contain the heart-check mark and state that the product "Meets American Heart Association criteria for saturated fat and cholesterol for healthy people over age 2." While shopping, look for foods with the heart-check mark symbol on their label. These foods are approved to be part of a healthy diet.

*Courtesy of americanheart.org