

What is a Heart Healthy Diet?

A heart healthy diet is one of the best weapons you have to fight cardiovascular disease. The food you eat and the amount can affect controllable risk factors: cholesterol, blood pressure, diabetes, and weight. A diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and other high-fiber foods, nuts, fish, lean protein, and low-fat dairy products while limited in red meat, sugary foods and beverages is the key! Simple and what might seem like small changes can make a big difference in living a better life.

Blood cholesterol levels are one of the major risk factors for heart disease. When there is too much cholesterol in the blood, it builds up in the walls of arteries and blocks blood flow to the heart.

LDL is considered the “bad” cholesterol. It is the type of cholesterol that blocks arteries. Ways to lower total and LDL cholesterol levels:

- Eat less saturated fat and trans fat
 - Women should eat a max of 8-10 grams saturated fat per day
 - Men should eat a max of 11-15 grams saturated fat per day
 - Saturated fat is found in red meats, full-fat dairy products, butter, lard, coconut milk, packaged and processed foods
 - Trans fats are man-made and shouldn't be found in large quantities in the American diet after 2018 when they were banned by the federal government
- Replace saturated fats with unsaturated fats
 - Consume fish twice per week for heart health
 - Nuts, seeds, avocado, oils are heart healthy fats but should still be consumed in moderation because they are calorie dense!
- Increase fiber, especially soluble fiber in your diet
 - Men need 30-38 grams of fiber per day
 - Women need 21-25 grams of fiber per day
 - Fruits, beans, peas, oatmeal, lentils, seeds are good sources of soluble fiber
- Move toward a healthy weight if you are overweight
 - Watch portion sizes, avoid high calorie foods



HDL is considered the “good” cholesterol. It helps clear arteries from clogs.

Ways to increase good cholesterol and decrease triglycerides:

- Regular aerobic exercise: brisk walking, swimming, jogging, bicycling

Ways to decrease triglycerides:

- Choose high fiber carbs, limit refined carbs and simple sugars
 - Limit sugary beverages, cakes, cookies, ice cream, chips, etc
- Control your blood sugar levels if you have diabetes or pre-diabetes
- Limit alcohol intake
 - Moderation is <2 drinks per day for men and <1 drink per day for women

Limit sodium (salt) to 1,500-2,000 mg per day:

- Too much sodium in the diet is linked with high blood pressure and can cause fluid retention and swelling in the feet and hands; high blood pressure can lead to stroke, cardiovascular and kidney disease
- 75% of the sodium we eat comes from packaged and processed foods (READ YOUR LABELS!) and restaurant meals; <20% comes from the salt we add from the shaker
- Limit processed meats (bacon, lunch meat, canned meats), salty snacks (chips, pretzels, salted nuts, etc), pickled foods (olives, pickles, sauerkraut), canned foods, packaged foods (frozen meals, ramen noodles, instant oatmeal, instant potatoes, Hamburger Helper), restaurant foods
- Choose more fresh foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, dried beans, frozen vegetables without sauce, low sodium or no-salt added snacks, lunch meats, and canned items