

# Foods for optimal heart health



A lifestyle focusing on a healthy diet is the best weapon to fight heart disease or stroke. Because a person's heart works like a well-manufactured machine. A person needs to give his heart-healthy fuel to keep it functional always and performing optimally. The food a person eats matters in keeping the heart in shape as much as it is critical for him or her to engage in regular exercises.

If you are looking to prevent heart disease and improve your cardiovascular health, what are the best foods for heart health? Have you considered checking which foods are healthiest for your heart? Studies show that a heart-healthy diet might reduce a person's risk of cardiovascular diseases by 80 percent.



## **Dr. Sarla Kumari**

Specialist Physician & Diabetologist at Canadian Specialist Hospital

In fact, there is no single food that can improve a person's heart health. It is vital to adopt an overall dietary pattern than any specific food. In order to start a heart-healthy diet, a person needs to understand the types of cholesterol first.

### **Total Cholesterol:**

This is the total amount of cholesterol in your blood. The higher the number, the more likely it is affecting your health. The total cholesterol is categorized as low-density lipoprotein (LDL) that is called "bad" cholesterol as it can stick to vessel walls, reduce or block blood flow; and triglycerides that is another type of fat in your blood where the body uses alcohol, extra calories or sugar to produce this type of fat.

### **High-density lipoprotein (HDL):**

This is called "good" cholesterol because it carries excess cholesterol out of the blood and away from the heart.

What can a person do to improve his heart health? There are five ways to maintain a healthier heart going for a healthier food pattern!

### **Make healthy food choices:**

Select foods from all major food groups consume at least five servings of fruits and vegetables daily; Include low-fat or fat-free dairy products, fish, legumes, poultry, and lean meats; choose whole grain and high fiber foods; aim for at least two servings of fish a week, and reduce food portion sizes. Make even better choices by comparing food labels when shopping, and picking foods low in saturated and trans fats, whenever possible, and ask your server for low-fat or heart-healthy options when eating out.

## **Limit your trans-fat and saturated fat intake:**

Trans-fat is man-made to increase the shelf life of stored foods. When a person consumes trans-fat, it increases his / her LDL (bad) cholesterol and decreases HDL (good) cholesterol. The trans-fat, also known as partially hydrogenated oils, are listed as an ingredient on food labels. If possible, avoid all trans-fats.

Meanwhile, saturated fats occur naturally in many foods. The majority come mainly from animal sources, including meat and dairy products. Saturated fats increase the level of total cholesterol and LDL (bad) cholesterol in your blood. High levels of blood cholesterol increase a person's risk of heart disease.

Saturated fat is found in fatty cuts of meat, poultry with skin, whole-milk dairy products, tropical oils, such as coconut, palm kernel, and palm oils; fried foods, lard, and cream; many snacks and sweets.

**Tips to decrease saturated and trans-fat:** Choose white-meat chicken and turkey without the skin, instead of red meats, especially high-fat cuts, and organ meats; Go for lean ground beef instead of regular ground beef, which is higher in fat. Instead of whole eggs with yolks, choose egg whites or egg substitutes, and instead of whole milk, choose fat-free or low-fat milk and dairy products.

**Tips to decrease saturated and trans-fat:** Choose whole-grain oatmeal, flavored with fresh fruit, instead of packaged oatmeal, flavored with sugar and salt; choose fresh fruit and vegetables with low-fat dressing or hummus, instead of potato chips and dip; choose reduced-fat varieties or substitutes, instead of butter. Look for the words "lite" or "fat-free" in the labels.

## **Opting for healthy fats**

By replacing saturated fats with monounsaturated fats you can lower your LDL cholesterol and increase your HDL cholesterol. Monounsaturated fat or Omega 6 fatty acids are essential healthy fats that are found in Olive oil and canola oil. But remember that just 1 tablespoon of oil contains approximately 14 grams of fat and 120 calories; so, although it is the healthier fat, you still need to use it in small amounts. Other foods rich in monounsaturated fats are olives, avocados, peanut butter, nuts, and seeds.

Polyunsaturated fat or Omega-3 fatty acids are other types of healthy fats. Omega-3 fatty acids benefit the heart of healthy people, those at high risk, and those who have heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends eating a variety of fish (preferably fatty fish like mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna, and salmon) at least twice a week. Other foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids include flaxseed, canola oil, soybean oils, and walnuts.

## **Eat enough fiber**

Eat beans, whole-grain cereals, and oatmeal, and aim for five servings of fruits and vegetables daily. Anything with 5 g of fiber or more is a high source of fiber. The average worldwide adult consumes 10 g of dietary fiber per day. However, it is recommended that adults consume 25-35 g of fiber/day for optimal health! Recommendations for children aged above three years is to consume their 'age plus 5 g' of dietary fiber per day.

## **Practice weight management**

Control the calories you consume to take action in managing your weight. It takes 3,500 calories to equal almost 0.5 kg of body fat. Cutting back just 500 calories per day can promote a 0.5 kg of weight loss per week. What does 500 calories look like? A big burger equals approximately 500 calories. If you are overweight, just losing 5 to 10 percent of your weight can significantly reduce your blood cholesterol!

To achieve healthy body weight, avoid excess intake of calories. Balance your calories by not overeating or getting regular exercise. Limit foods that are high in sugar and low nutritional quality, such as candy.

Certain foods are good for the heart and it makes sense to include them in the diet. I advise the Mediterranean diet, which best encompasses all the above tips and arguably the ideal diet to promote heart (and overall) health. make a deliberate and effort to know and plan what we eat. Include heart-friendly foods in your daily diet, as they will not only keep your heart safe but will also help you stay in shape.

## **Live a healthy lifestyle**

Manage stress, do not smoke, do not drink alcohol, have at least 7 to 8 hours of sleep, drink at least 1.5-2 L of water a day, control your blood pressure and blood sugar levels.

Dr Sarla Kumari

(Specialist Physician & Diabetologist at Canadian Specialist Hospital)