Healthy Eating: Eating Heart-Healthy Foods

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Overview

Heart-healthy eating means eating food that can help lower your risk of heart disease, heart attack, and stroke.

You eat lots of heart-healthy foods such as vegetables, fruits, nuts, beans, lean meat, fish, and whole grains. You limit foods that are not so good for your heart, like sodium, alcohol, and sugar. You also balance the calories you eat with your physical activity to stay at a healthy weight.

There are a few heart-healthy eating plans. They include the DASH diet and the Mediterranean diet.

How to eat a heart-healthy diet

Watch your portions

- Use food labels to learn what the recommended servings are for the foods you eat.
- Eat only the number of calories you need to stay at a healthy weight. If you need to lose weight, eat fewer calories than your body burns (through exercise and other physical activity).

Eat more fruits and vegetables

- Eat a variety of fruit and vegetables every day. Dark green, deep orange, red, or yellow fruits and vegetables are especially good for you. Examples include spinach, carrots, peaches, and berries.
- Keep carrots, celery, and other veggies handy for snacks. Buy fruit that is in season and store it where you can see it so that you will be tempted to eat it.
- Cook dishes that have a lot of veggies in them, such as stir-fries and soups.

Limit saturated fat

- Read food labels, and try to avoid saturated fats. They increase your risk of heart disease.
- Use olive or canola oil when you cook.
- Bake, broil, grill, or steam foods instead of frying them.
- Choose lean meats instead of high-fat meats such as hot dogs and sausages. Cut off all visible fat when you prepare meat.

- Eat fish, skinless poultry, and meat alternatives such as soy products instead of high-fat meats. Soy products, such as tofu, may be especially good for your heart.
- Choose low-fat or fat-free milk and dairy products.

Eat foods high in fiber

- Eat a variety of grain products every day. Include whole-grain foods that have lots of fiber and nutrients. Examples of whole-grain foods include oats, whole wheat bread, and brown rice.
- Buy whole-grain breads and cereals, instead of white bread or pastries.

Limit salt and sodium

- Limit how much salt and sodium you eat to help lower your blood pressure.
- Taste food before you salt it. Add only a little salt when you think you need it. With time, your taste buds will adjust to less salt.
- Eat fewer snack items, fast foods, and other high-salt, processed foods. Check food labels for the amount of sodium in packaged foods.
- Choose low-sodium versions of canned goods (such as soups, vegetables, and beans).

Limit sugar

- Limit drinks and foods with added sugar. These include candy, desserts, and soda pop.

Limit alcohol

- Limit alcohol to no more than 2 drinks a day for men and 1 drink a day for women. Too much alcohol can cause health problems.

How can you get started?

Start with small changes. Make one or two changes at a time. As soon as you are used to those, make another one or two changes. Over time, making a number of small changes can add up and make a big difference in your health.

Here are some ideas about how to get started.

- Choose whole-grain bread instead of white bread.
- Have a piece of fruit instead of a candy bar.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables.
    - Start by adding an extra serving of fruit or vegetables to your meals.
- Switch from 2% or whole milk to 1% or nonfat milk.
- Eat lean proteins.
    - Choose a variety of protein foods.
    - Heart-healthy proteins include seafood, lean meats and poultry, eggs, beans, peas, nuts, seeds, and soy products.
- Use olive or canola oil instead of butter for cooking.
- Use herbs and spices.
    - They can add flavor to your food without adding salt.
- Modify your favorite recipes.

◦ Your favorite dishes can still taste good with less fat and calories.

It may take some time to get used to new tastes and habits, but don't give up. Keep in mind the good things you are doing for your heart and your overall health.

Related Information

- Healthy Eating
- Heart-Healthy Lifestyle

Credits

Note: The "printer friendly" document will not contain all the information available in the online document. Some information (e.g. cross-references to other topics, definitions or medical illustrations) is only available in the online version.