



# Foods for Health: Eating for Heart Health



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Heart disease affects one in every three adults and is the leading cause of death in the United States. Consuming a diet that is low in both saturated and *trans* fats, cholesterol, and sodium may help reduce your risk of heart disease. However, that is only one side of the equation. It is also important to consume foods to promote heart health such as whole grains, soluble fibers, fruits and vegetables, unsaturated fats, soy protein, and even chocolate.

## Understanding Heart Health

Our hearts work hard to keep blood circulating throughout our bodies. Maintaining healthy blood flow and healthy cholesterol and blood pressure levels are important parts of reducing your risk of heart disease. Health professionals use blood pressure and cholesterol levels to better understand the health of their patients' hearts.

In addition to managing weight and stress, getting regular physical activity, plenty of sleep and not smoking, we can improve heart health by eating a nutritious and balanced diet.

### Blood Pressure

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against artery walls. High blood pressure usually has no symptoms but it can cause serious problems like stroke and heart attacks. High blood pressure is defined in an adult as a systolic pressure of 140 mm Hg or higher and/or a diastolic pressure of 90 mm Hg or higher.

### Cholesterol

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance that occurs naturally in all parts of the body. Your body needs cholesterol to work properly. However, if you have too much cholesterol in your blood it can stick to the walls of your arteries. This buildup is called plaque. Plaque can narrow your arteries or even block the blood flow, causing a heart attack or stroke. According to the National Institutes of Health, less than 200 mg/dl is considered a desirable blood cholesterol level; more than 240 mg/dl is considered high total cholesterol. There are several types of cholesterol, but two types of cholesterol: Low-Density Lipoprotein (LDL) and High-Density Lipoprotein (HDL) may be monitored closely by a health professional because of their effects on heart health.

### “Good” and “Bad” Cholesterol

LDL is often called “bad” cholesterol. When your health professional tells you that you have high LDL levels, it means you are at risk for a build-up of cholesterol (plaque) in the arteries, and ultimately heart disease.



HDL is often called “good” cholesterol. HDL carries cholesterol from other parts of your body to the liver, where it is removed from the body. When you have a lot of cholesterol moving to the liver, this translates to high HDL levels in the blood. Thus, having high HDL levels of cholesterol, greater than 40 mg/dl, and low LDL levels, less than 100 mg/dl, are both important to help reduce the risk of heart disease.

## Foods that Promote Heart Health

As you look for ways to consume a diet that is low in sodium, saturated and *trans* fats, and cholesterol, challenge yourself to replace these foods with some of the foods, beverages and food components listed below.

### Fruits and Vegetables

Plums, bananas, sweet potatoes, spinach, beans, and peaches are not only sources of fiber, but they also contain potassium and other phytonutrients and antioxidants. Potassium can help with blood pressure by blunting the effects of sodium on blood pressure. All forms of fruits and vegetables, whether fresh, canned, frozen, dried or 100 percent juice can assist you in your effort to build good health. At the grocery store, be sure to choose a variety of deeply colored fruits and vegetables like carrots, apricots, broccoli, beets, and kidney beans to maximize your intake of vitamins and minerals.

## Whole Grains

A host of components in whole grains work together to promote health. These include fiber, vitamins, minerals, and hundreds of phytonutrients, such as antioxidants and polyphenols. To reap the benefits, aim for at least 3 daily servings of whole grains such as ready-to-eat cereals, breads, crackers, and pasta containing whole grains (look for the phrase “whole grain” or “whole” before the grain’s name), brown rice, oatmeal, barley, popcorn, couscous, wild rice, bulgur, quinoa, and amaranth.

## Fiber

Fiber is commonly found in both whole grains and certain enriched grain-based foods. People consuming these foods often have a higher intake of soluble fiber, found in oats and barley, which may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease through its beneficial effects on blood cholesterol. Diets high in foods that contain fiber such as fruits, vegetables and grain products have been associated with a reduced risk of heart disease.

## “Heart Healthy” Fats

Enjoy the health benefits of a moderate-fat diet by choosing oils and spreads rich in unsaturated fat, such as olive, canola, high oleic safflower, sunflower, corn, or soybean oils. Salmon, sardines, herring, trout, and tuna are terrific sources of the omega-3 fatty acids, docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), which are types of polyunsaturated fats that may reduce the risk of heart disease.

Check the label, omega-3s are also added to some brands of peanut butter, milk, mayonnaise, cooking oil, cereal, pasta, eggs, and nutrition bars.

## Nuts

As a rich source of protein, fiber, vitamins, minerals, and unsaturated fats, nuts are a powerhouse food that can promote heart health. Almonds and hazelnuts are also high in vitamin E, which helps support blood flow to and from the heart. Eating 1½ ounces of nuts such as almonds, hazelnuts, peanuts, pecans, pistachios, and walnuts (about a small handful) every day may also help reduce the risk of heart disease.

## Stanols and Sterols

These plant-based food components help block the absorption of cholesterol in the intestine, which has a beneficial effect on blood cholesterol. They are found in foods like corn, soy, wheat and some fortified foods like soft table spreads, orange juice, and yogurt. Studies have shown that 1-3 grams of stanols (or sterols) are needed each day to see beneficial effects.

## Soy Protein

Diets that include 25 mg of soy protein per day can also help to reduce the risk of heart disease. Look for soy in nutrition bars, fortified soy beverages, tofu, cheese, and edamame or try adding soy protein to your favorite smoothie.

## Dark Chocolate

Yes, you heard right. Some dark chocolates can contain a plentiful mix of natural phytonutrients called flavanols. These cocoa-derived flavanols have been shown to help support blood flow and circulation. When included in moderation, dark chocolate can be part of a balanced diet. Flavanoids can also be found in berries, grapes, tea, apples, onions, and red wine.



## Tips to Promote Heart Health

- When preparing meals, try to fill half of your plate with fruits, vegetables, or both.
- Prepare 2 meals each week that include a 3 ounce serving of fish such as salmon, trout, or tuna.
- Look for cereals with 3 grams of fiber or more per serving, and jazz up your breakfast with either sliced almonds and cinnamon or a ¼ cup of dried fruit.
- Keep a whole-grain cereal bar or packet of oatmeal in your desk drawer for days when you miss breakfast.
- Enjoy a soy-based energy bar as a pre- or post-workout snack.

## Physical Activity

Being heart healthy is about eating the right foods AND having an active lifestyle. Participating in regular physical activity may reduce your risk of an early death, and helps reduce risk of heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure.

Health benefits can be gained by doing 2 1/2 hours of moderate-intensity exercise each week. Engaging in different types of physical activity is also important to overall fitness – try to incorporate aerobic exercises, strength training, and stretching into your weekly routine.

## About International Food Information Council Foundation



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Learn more about foods and beverages that can promote heart health by watching our “Foods for Health: Eating for Heart Health” video with David Grotto, RD on:

[www.foodinsight.org](http://www.foodinsight.org)

Learn more [“Quick Tips to Give Your Diet a Boost”](#).