

Health Facts:

Eating for Heart Health

Overview

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in American men and women. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), heart disease kills about 600,000 people in the United States each year. Yet, many may continue to underestimate their risk.

Risk Factors

Risk factors for heart disease include:

- Your age (55 or older for women)
- Your family history (if your mother or sister had heart disease before age 65 or father or brother had heart disease before age 55, then you are at greater risk for heart disease)
- Smoking tobacco
- Being sedentary
- Being at an unhealthy weight (more than 20 percent over ideal body weight)
- Having high blood pressure, also called hypertension (blood pressure reading of 140/90 or greater)
- Having high LDL "bad" cholesterol (greater than 100 mg/dL) and/or low HDL "good" cholesterol (less than 50 mg/dL for women or less than 40 mg/dL for men)
- Having prediabetes or diabetes

Facts to Know

The good news is that heart disease often can be prevented. While some risk factors are beyond your control—such as increasing age and family history of early heart disease—the lifestyle choices you make every day can have a big impact on your risk of heart disease. You can significantly lower your risk of developing heart disease—by as much as 82 percent—by adopting sensible health habits. And the most beneficial change you can make is to adopt a heart-healthy diet.

Diets that are low in cholesterol and salt and that emphasize vegetables, whole grains, and "good" fats—such as omega-3s—can help prevent heart disease and stroke.

Omega 3s: The Heart-Healthy Fats

Also known as polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA), omega-3s are essential fatty acids, meaning the body needs them for building cell membranes. The body cannot make them, so you must get them through food. There are three primary types of omega-3s. Those that are considered most beneficial are eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), and fish is the best dietary source for these omega-3s. Studies have shown that eating just two servings of fish a week contributed to a 36 percent reduction in deaths from a sudden heart attack.

Eating a diet rich in omega-3s has been shown to:

- Lower risk of heart disease and stroke
- Reduce inflammation, helping to prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer and arthritis
- Improve brain function such as memory and cognition

The fish that are highest in DHA and EPA include salmon, mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines and albacore tuna.

Other sources of omega-3s include soy foods like tofu, as well as walnuts, flaxseeds, canola and their oils. These plant sources contain a third type of omega-3s called alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). The body only partially converts ALA to EPA and DHA, which can make it challenging to get the recommended amounts from plant sources alone. You can get additional omega-3s with enhanced foods, such as some eggs, milk, juice, breads and cereal. Look for labels that say omega-3 "fortified," "enhanced" or "enriched."

Here are four other easy steps toward a heart-healthy diet:

1. Choose heart-healthy fats

Making simple swaps in your daily diet—like substituting fish for meat in your favorite dishes or using olive oil instead of butter—can go a long way toward a heart-healthy diet. Here are some more tips to help you reduce unhealthy fats and increase the heart-healthy fats in your diet:

- Eat at least two servings (3.5-ounces each) of fish rich in omega-3s per week to ensure you get recommended amounts of DHA and EPA; this can include canned tuna.
- When cooking meats, choose lean versions like pork tenderloin or extra-lean ground beef, and remove skin from chicken and turkey.
- Drain the fat from cooked meats or after browning ground beef for stews, tacos and other family favorites.
- Baste chicken and turkey with wine, low-sodium chicken stock, vegetable stock or fruit juice instead of using (fat) drippings.
- Use heart-healthy oils, such as vegetable oils like olive, canola, corn, safflower, sesame, soybean, sunflower or peanut, as well as flaxseed and walnut oils.
- Minimize use of saturated—or solid—fats like butter, margarine and lard. Also avoid palm and coconut oils, which are high in saturated fats.
- Dress salads using olive oil, and sprinkle walnuts or flaxseeds on top, for added omega-3s.

2. Cook lean

Use cooking methods that require little or no fat—boil, broil, bake, roast or poach foods rather than pan-frying them. You can also stew, grill, stir-fry or steam foods.

3. Eat moderate portions

Many people can't visualize healthy portion sizes and therefore eat too much. To choose healthful individual portion sizes, picture the following objects:

- 3 to 4 ounces (one serving) of meat, fish or poultry: the size of a deck of cards
- 1 ounce of low-fat or fat-free cheese: the size of four dice
- 1/2 cup of cooked rice or pasta: 1/2 of a baseball
- 1 baked potato: a tennis ball
- 2 tablespoons of peanut butter: a ping-pong ball

4. Talk with your health care provider

For guidance on eating healthier, talk with your health care provider. Here are some questions to ask:

- Do I need to restrict my calories, fat or sodium?
- What is a healthy weight for me?
- What are the recommended portion sizes for adults?
- Do I need to see a nutritionist or dietitian? If so, can you recommend one?
- How do I read food labels?
- Should I keep a food diary?

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