

## Nutrition and Heart Health

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Many people wonder why it is important to consider nutrition when discussing heart disease. It is estimated that approximately 80% of heart disease is preventable. This is exciting news, because when we talk about prevention, we are considering the things that we can control. We can control what we **do**, so certainly our eating habits - what, how and how much we eat- are variables over which we have total control. Knowing we have choices in reducing our risk of heart disease is very empowering.

We can specifically reduce our risk by adopting a healthier way to eat by copying what has kept people healthy in specific population groups across the globe. Studies dating back to the 1950's have demonstrated there are specific population groups across the world who have very low incidence of chronic diseases, including heart disease. A growing body of research has confirmed one of the things these groups have in common is *what and how they eat*. Based on this data, we now know that the healthiest way to eat is a *plant-based diet*.

So what does a plant-based diet look like? Well, you don't have to be a vegetarian to consume a plant-based diet, but if you eat a typical American diet, you will definitely need to eat more vegetables! The healthiest people eat a diet which includes a large amount of vegetables at meals. They also consume whole grains with naturally-occurring fiber, like stoneground whole wheat, rye, oats and barley, and they eat fruits daily, often as dessert. The proteins consumed, in limited amounts, are primarily fish, chicken and legumes – dried beans and peas, and nuts and seeds. They also eat limited amounts of eggs and low fat and nonfat dairy as protein sources. Imagine a dinner plate: ½ filled with vegetables, ¼ filled with whole grain starch or starchy vegetable and ¼ filled with protein. This is a plant-based diet. Compare this with the typical American diet: the middle of the plate filled with protein, like meat, with a side of starch and a smattering of vegetables on the side for color.

In addition to these basics, the healthiest diets include heart-healthy fats, like olive and nut oils, fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, sardines and tuna, and nuts, seeds and avocado. These healthiest people consume a moderate amount of wine and drink water as their primary beverage. They season their foods with herbs and spices and use very small amounts of salt. They consume limited amounts of packaged and processed foods, which are typically high in salt, sugar and unhealthy saturated and trans fats.

Not only this, but the healthiest people don't overeat (and they are not overweight). They eat planned, mindful meals with friends and family, and stop eating when they are satisfied. In addition, these people are also physically active in their daily routines. You may have heard of the traditional Mediterranean diet, the Omni Heart diet, or the original DASH diet. All these dietary eating patterns are considered the "heart-healthiest" and come from what we have learned since the 1950's.

So how can we apply these dietary patterns to our daily routines?

1. First plan ahead by starting with heart healthy recipes for meals. Good places to look are the American Heart Association, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and other reputable sites for good menu ideas. For on-the-go, consider heart-healthy snacks like nuts and seeds, fruits, low-or non-fat and/low-sugar yogurts, vegetables with yogurt dips and other low fat dips or hummus.
2. Do smart shopping:
  - a. Go prepared with a list and stick to it. Avoid shopping when you're hungry to avoid impulse purchases.
  - b. Shop the perimeter of the supermarket:
    - i. Fill your cart with plenty of vegetables and fruits – rich with varied colors, textures, flavors and smells – to get not only vitamins, minerals, and fiber, but valuable phytonutrients which give these foods their characteristics.
    - ii. Buy lean proteins like fish, poultry and lean loin and round cuts of meat, and low fat and nonfat dairy.
    - iii. Choose whole, hearty grains.
    - iv. Limit those center aisles to healthier options: Read the labels to compare similar products for serving sizes, calories, fat, sugar, fiber and sodium.
3. Cook wisely:
  - a. Bake, broil, grill, braise and steam as cooking methods and avoid deep frying.
  - b. Use herbs and spices instead of salt.
  - c. Choose heart healthy fats and oils and limit the amounts, especially if you need to lose weight.
  - d. Watch your portion sizes and avoid over-eating. Consider preparing less or putting the leftovers away immediately after cooking.
  - e. Consider pre-portioning from the stove to eat the right proportions.
  - f. Try 1-2 nights per week having vegetarian meals, and 1-2 nights having fish for protein.
4. Take your time with meals.
  - a. Slow down and enjoy your meals with family and friends.
  - b. Consider eating in courses to slow the process and pace yourself.
5. Eat out wisely and order smart:
  - a. Avoid fried foods.
  - b. Request sauces and dressings on the side, then use your fork to dip into the extras to avoid overeating fat-laden toppings.
  - c. Ask for less salt-based seasonings and use pepper instead of salt at the table.

- d. Order healthier additions (for ex., lemon on fish instead of butter).
- e. Order extra vegetables as side dishes.
- f. Exercise portion control by asking for a to-go box when you order and proportion before you start the meal, or share the meal.
- g. Pay attention to your beverages: Liquid calories add up! Drink the water they provide.
- h. Share dessert or skip it. It is hard to resist and there's always room, even if you're full. Consider not looking at the dessert menu.
- i. Trade off if you're watching your calories: For ex., skip the bread if you want wine or dessert.
- j. Choose healthy if you're eating on-the-run: Carry food with you. If you do go for fast food, most places will offer grilled chicken on salads or sandwiches. Watch the toppings and dressings.

These are just a few tips to help you eat healthier. If you want to reduce your risk of heart disease, in addition to choosing a healthier diet, live a balanced life. Eat just enough, move more, and manage stress. Adopting these healthy life habits can significantly protect your heart and pave the way to a healthier life.