

Q. What are the best foods to eat for heart health?

A. Making an effort to eat healthy foods is one of the best things you can do to prevent heart disease.

Start by taking a look at what you eat now. If you're already eating a variety of healthy foods, keep it up.

But if you're like a lot of people, your food choices could be a little better. You might know that fast foods like french fries, onion rings, cheeseburgers, soft drinks, and pastries have a lot of fats, salts, and sugars. But did you know that most microwave meals and processed foods do too? They all have high levels of saturated fat, transfat, sodium, sugar, and other ingredients that aren't good for you.

If you eat a lot of these foods, you're at risk for high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and other health problems. These conditions can damage your arteries, which can lead to heart attack, stroke, and death.

Choosing the right foods can help prevent heart disease and even help if you're already at risk. And it's easy to do. Just make plant-based foods the biggest part of your daily diet.

Fruits & vegetables

At meal time, make half your plate fruits and vegetables. Brightly-colored fruits and leafy-green vegetables are best. They have high levels of antioxidants that can help prevent plaque build-up in your



arteries. Ultimately, this protects your heart. Aim for 8-10 daily servings of fruits and vegetables.

Nuts & Seeds

Nuts and seeds have healthy, unsaturated fat. This kind of fat helps lower your bad cholesterol level. And that can protect your heart from disease. Nuts also contain omega-3 fatty acids and other nutrients that can improve the health of your arteries and lower your risk for blood clots. Try to eat a small handful of nuts each day (about 1.5 ounces).

Legumes

Legumes, such as black beans, kidney beans, and peas, contain the highest amount of fiber of any food group. High-fiber foods can

lower cholesterol levels, reduce your risk for diabetes, and keep you feeling hungry to avoid weight gain. All of this can lead to a healthier heart. Adult women need at least 25 grams of dietary fiber per day for best health. Men need at least 38 grams per day.

Whole Grains

Whole grains contain bran, fiber, and other nutrients that help lower your blood sugar, cholesterol levels, and triglycerides (a kind of fat) in the blood – all good for heart health. Eat at least three servings of whole grains per day. A variety of grains is best. Try oatmeal, shredded wheat cereal, whole-grain breads and pasta, brown rice, rye crisp, and quinoa. If you're allergic to gluten, avoid foods made from barley, wheat, and rye. Instead, eat gluten-free grains like amaranth, quinoa, and buckwheat.

Protect your heart with a plant-based diet

Eating a plant-based diet is the best way to reduce your risk for heart disease. If you're not used to eating this way, start small with a healthy snack. Gradually add more fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes, and whole grains to your eating plan. Then top off your new eating habits with 30 to 60 minutes of exercise on most days for a healthier heart.

Sources:

*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
Harvard School of Public Health.*

