



February is Heart Health Month at the Y. Enjoy these life saving tips provided by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and connect with our Healthy Living staff to learn more about how to keep your heart in check.

Good nutrition and lifestyle play big roles in keeping your heart healthy. You can decrease your risk of heart disease by making smart food choices. Fill up on fiber-rich whole grains, fruits, vegetables, beans and lentils. Choose plant-based fats, such as avocado, nuts, seeds and olive oil, instead of animal-based fats such as butter. Read on to learn more about how to protect your heart for life.

Fruits and Vegetables Matter

Eat less fatty meats and more plant-based foods, such as vegetables and legumes. Not only are fruits and vegetables low in calories and high in fiber and antioxidants, they can help keep blood pressure in check. High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart attack and stroke. What makes fruits and veggies so good? They are packed with potassium, a mineral that has been shown to lower blood pressure in clinical studies.

Aim for 4,700 milligrams of potassium every day for good blood pressure. That's at least 2 cups of fruit and 2½ cups of vegetables daily. The best picks are tomatoes, leafy greens, potatoes, bananas and squash.

Fat Matters for the Heart

The amount and type of fat you eat makes a difference. Research shows eating too much saturated fat is not good for the heart. Foods such as bacon, red meat, butter and ice cream contain saturated fat. You also should avoid trans fats or partially hydrogenated oils. These fats can clog arteries and raise cholesterol levels. Trans fats are found in commercial baked goods and fried foods.

Unsaturated fat has been found to be beneficial for overall cardiovascular health. Foods including olive oil, canola oil, avocados, walnuts and almonds contain unsaturated fat, and help cholesterol levels by raising "good" HDL cholesterol and lowering "bad" LDL cholesterol.

Omega-3 fatty-acids, a type of unsaturated fat, have been found to be helpful in preventing sudden death from heart attacks. Fatty fish, such as salmon, mackerel, tuna and herring, contain two types of omega-3 fatty acids, docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA). The recommended intake for omega-3 fatty acids is 500 milligrams per day. That's about two 6-ounce servings of fatty fish per week.

Another type of omega-3 fat, alpha-linolenic acid (ALA) provides cardiac benefits. Flaxseeds and walnuts contain ALA. Eat 2 tablespoons of ground flaxseed or 1 ounce (about a handful) of walnuts each day for heart health.

Exercise Does the Heart Good

Aim for at least 30 to 60 minutes of regular, aerobic exercise most days of the week. Simple activities make a difference. This includes walking, jogging, biking and dancing. Participate in strength training, such as weightlifting, at least two to three times per week. Remember to incorporate balance and flexibility exercises, too.

Prioritize Stress Management

Even if you eat right and exercise regularly, poorly managed stress can wreak havoc on your health. Getting enough sleep, relaxation techniques and nurturing relationships are healthy habits that can help protect you from the harmful effects of stress.



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