



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.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in American women. Diet, lifestyle choices and a few other key factors play a big role in a wide range of heart conditions. Take care of your heart by choosing the right foods to promote overall health.

Fruits and Vegetables Matter

When it comes to loading your plate, fruits and vegetables are where it's at. Not only are they low in calories and high in dietary fiber and antioxidants,

they also can help keep blood pressure in check. High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart attack and stroke. What makes fruits and vegetables so good? They are packed with potassium, a mineral that has been shown to lower blood pressure in clinical studies.

For most adults, aiming for at least 2 cups of fruit and 3 cups of vegetables daily, is a good way to make sure you're meeting your potassium goals. Plus, research has shown that fruit and vegetable intake is associated with a reduced risk for many chronic diseases, including heart disease.

Fat Matters for the Heart

The type of fat you eat also makes a difference. According to the 2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, a healthy eating plan can contain up to 35 percent of total calories from fat. However, less than 10 percent should come from saturated fat.

A diet high in saturated fat may increase the risk for heart disease. Foods such as bacon, sausages, fatty meats, butter, ice cream and other full-fat dairy foods can be high in saturated fat.

Replacing sources of saturated fat with unsaturated fats has been shown to be beneficial in reducing “bad” cholesterol levels and may help lower the risk for heart disease. Foods such as olive oil, canola oil, avocados, nuts and seeds contain unsaturated fat.

Omega-3 fatty acids are a special type of unsaturated fat commonly found in fatty fish, such as salmon, mackerel, tuna and herring. They also are found in walnuts and flaxseed. Fish is a good source of eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), whereas nuts and seeds contain alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). Because these foods contain different types of omega-3 fatty acids, it is good to include a variety in the diet.

Slow and Steady Weight Loss for Heart Health

If your body mass index is considered to be overweight or obese, gradual weight loss offers the best results for overall health. Even a 5 to 10 percent loss in body weight can help reduce blood pressure and lead to other improvements in health. Regular physical activity also can be beneficial. Get at least 30 minutes of regular activity most days of the week. More moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity may be required for weight loss, so be sure to check with your physician before starting an exercise program.

Other Risk Factors

While you can change what you eat and whether you are physically active, there are some risk factors for heart disease you cannot change. These include:

Aging: The risk for heart disease increases with age.

Family History: Having a close blood relative with heart disease increases your risk of having heart disease.

Race: Black women have a higher risk of heart disease and stroke than white women.

Previous Heart Attack: A history for past heart attacks increases the odds of having more in the future.

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