

Diet and Exercise: Healthy Balance for a Healthy Heart

How does what I eat affect my heart?

The food you eat can affect the way blood flows through your heart and arteries. A diet high in fat and cholesterol can gradually cause a buildup (called “plaque”) in your arteries that slows down the blood flow and even blocks small arteries. If the blockage happens in an artery that carries blood to the heart muscle, the heart muscle can die. That’s a heart attack. If the blockage happens in an artery that carries blood to the brain, part of the brain can die. That’s a stroke (also called a brain attack). The right diet helps keep your arteries clear and reduces the risk of heart problems and stroke. Keeping your heart healthy by watching what you eat isn’t as hard as it sounds!

Tips for a heart-healthy diet

- Eat less fat (especially butter, coconut and palm oil, saturated or hydrogenated vegetable fats like Crisco, animal fats in meats; fats in dairy products).
- Use nonstick vegetable oil cooking sprays instead of the oils.
- Buy lean cuts of meat; reduce portion size to 3 ounces (the size of a pack of cards).
- Eat more fish, skinless chicken and turkey.
- Try low-fat snacks (baked chips instead of fried; pretzels).
- Drink skim milk and buy low-fat cheese, yogurt and margarine.
- Buy sherbet, ice milk or frozen low-fat yogurt instead of ice cream.
- Have a bagel or English muffin instead of a donut or pastry.
- Eat no more than 4 egg yolks a week (use egg whites or egg substitutes).
- Bake, broil, steam or grill foods instead of frying them.
- Eat fewer “fast foods” (burgers, fried foods), which are high in fat.
- Eat more fruits, vegetables and carbohydrates (rice, pasta, breads, grains).

How much should I weigh?

Talk to your family doctor to answer this question, because every person is different. If you’re overweight, the extra pounds put extra stress on your heart. Losing weight will help your heart stay healthy. But even though people talk about weight, it’s really how much fat you have that matters.

Why is exercise good for my heart?

Exercise makes your heart stronger, helping it pump more blood with each heartbeat. The blood then delivers more oxygen to your body. Exercise can also lower blood pressure, reduce your risk of heart disease and reduce levels of LDL “bad cholesterol”, which clogs the arteries and can cause a heart attack. At the same time, exercise can raise levels of HDL “good cholesterol”, which helps protect against heart disease.

Exercise is the best way to lose weight. Burning calories and working off the fat will help you look and feel better. Regular exercise helps you burn calories faster, even when you’re sitting still.

What’s the best type of exercise for my heart?

Aerobic exercise causes you to breathe more deeply and makes your heart work harder to pump blood. Aerobic exercise also raises your heart rate (which also burns calories). Examples of aerobic exercise include: walking, jogging, running, swimming and bicycling.

How much exercise do I need?

You should slowly work up to 30 minutes, 4 to 6 times per week. Your doctor may make a different recommendation based on your health. For example, if you haven't exercised for a while it may be best to start with a couple of minutes of exercise and work up to a half hour. One sign that you may be overdoing it is if you can't carry on a conversation while you exercise. It is best to alternate exercise days with rest days to prevent injuries.

How will I fit exercise into my busy schedule?

There are lots of ways to raise your heart rate during your regular day. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Walk during a coffee break or lunch. Walk to work or park at the end of the parking lot so you have to walk farther. Walk more briskly. Do housework at a quicker pace and more often (like vacuuming every day). Rake leaves, push the lawn mower or do other yard work.

Suggested Reading: "Good Fat, Bad Fat" Gastelli and Griffin; Fisher Books; May 1997