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# Heart Healthy Eating

**Q: Why do I need to be concerned about heart healthy eating?**

**A:** What you eat affects your risk for having heart disease and poor blood circulation, which can lead to a heart attack or stroke. Heart disease is the number 1 killer and stroke is the number 3 killer of American women and men.

In the main type of heart disease, a fatty substance called plaque builds up in the arteries that bring oxygen-rich blood to the heart. Over time, this buildup causes the arteries to narrow and harden. When this happens, the heart does not get all the blood it needs to work properly. The result can be chest pain or a heart attack.

Most cases of stroke occur when a blood vessel bringing blood to the brain becomes blocked. The underlying condition for this type of blockage is having fatty deposits lining the vessel walls.

**Q: What foods should I eat to help prevent heart disease and stroke?**

**A:** You should eat mainly:

- fruits and vegetables
- grains (at least half of your grains should be whole grains, such as whole wheat, whole oats, oatmeal, whole-grain corn, brown rice, wild rice, whole rye, whole-grain barley, buckwheat, bulgur, millet, quinoa, and sorghum)

- fat-free or low-fat versions of milk, cheese, yogurt, and other milk products
- fish, skinless poultry, lean meats, dry beans, eggs, and nuts
- polyunsaturated (pol-ee-uhn-SACH-uh-ray-tid) and monounsaturated (mon-oh-uhn-SACH-uh-ray-tid) fats (found in fish, nuts, and vegetable oils)

Also, you should limit the amount of foods you eat that contain:

- saturated fat (found in foods such as fatty cuts of meat, whole milk, cheese made from whole milk, ice cream, sherbet, frozen yogurt, butter, lard, cakes, cookies, doughnuts, sausage, regular mayonnaise, coconut, palm oil)
- trans fat (found mainly in processed foods such as cakes, cookies, crackers, pies, stick or hard margarine, potato chips, corn chips)
- cholesterol (koh-LESS-tur-ol) (found in foods such as liver, chicken and turkey giblets, pork, sausage, whole milk, cheese made from whole milk, ice cream, sherbet, frozen yogurt)
- sodium (found in salt and baking soda)
- added sugars (such as corn syrup, corn sweetener, fructose, glucose, sucrose, dextrose, lactose, maltose, honey, molasses, raw sugar, invert sugar, malt syrup, syrup, caramel, and fruit juice concentrates)

Eating lots of saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol may cause plaque buildup in your arteries. Eating lots of sodium may cause you to develop high blood pressure, also called hypertension. Eating



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lots of added sugars may cause you to develop type 2 diabetes. Both hypertension and diabetes increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.

**Q: How can I tell how much saturated fat, trans fat, and other substances are in the foods I eat?**

**A:** Prepared foods that come in packages — such as breads, cereals, canned and frozen foods, snacks, desserts, and drinks — have a Nutrition Facts label on the package. The label states how many calories and how much saturated fat, trans fat, and other substances are in each serving. For information on how to read a Nutrition Facts label, see the Fitness and Nutrition section of [womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov).

For food that does not have a Nutrition Facts label, such as fresh salmon or a raw apple, you can use the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Nutrient Database . This is a bit harder than using the Nutrition Facts label. But by comparing different foods you can get an idea if a food is high or low in saturated fat, sodium, and other substances. To compare lots of different foods at one time, check out the Nutrient Lists.

**Q: Are there eating plans that can help me choose foods that are good for my heart?**

**A:** There are four eating plans that can help you choose heart healthy foods:

- MyPyramid eating plan
- Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan
- Heart Healthy Diet
- Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes (TLC) Diet

The MyPyramid eating plan is based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. It was developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to help people lower their risk of serious diseases linked to diet, including heart disease. DASH was developed by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) to help people with hypertension lower their blood pressure. But it can also be used to help prevent heart disease. The Heart Healthy Diet was developed by NHLBI to help people keep their blood levels of total cholesterol and LDL cholesterol (or "bad" cholesterol) low. The TLC diet was developed by NHLBI to help people with unhealthy blood cholesterol levels.

**What is a calorie?**

When talking about a calorie in food, it is a measure of the energy that the food supplies to your body. When talking about burning calories during physical activity, a calorie is a measure of the energy used by your body. To maintain the same body weight, the number of food calories you eat during the day should be about the same as the number of calories your body uses.

The number of calories you should eat each day depends on your age, sex, body size, how physically active you are, and other conditions. For instance, a woman between the ages of 31 and 50 who is of normal weight and moderately active should eat about 2,000 calories each day.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



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These eating plans have interactive web sites to help you choose foods that meet their guidelines. You key in your age, sex, height, weight, and activity level. Based on this information the web sites give you tips on what types of foods to eat and how much of each type.

**Q: How do these eating plans work?**

**A:** The four eating plans are similar. They are all designed to help you eat foods that are good for your heart and avoid foods that are bad for your heart. Below is a table comparing the main guidelines of the four eating plans:

	% of the day's total calories from saturated fat	% of the day's total calories from fat	amount of trans fat	milligrams (mg) of dietary cholesterol per day	milligrams (mg) of dietary sodium per day
MyPyramid	less than 10%	20-35%	as low as possible	less than 300 mg	less than 2300 mg*
DASH**	5%	22%	as low as possible	136 mg	less than 2300 mg*
Heart Healthy Diet	8-10%	30% or less	as low as possible	less than 300 mg	less than 2400 mg
TLC Diet	less than 7%	25-35% or less	as low as possible	less than 200 mg	less than 2400 mg

\*2300 milligrams of sodium in table salt is about 1 tsp of salt. People with hypertension should eat no more than 1500 mg of sodium a day (about 2/3 teaspoon of salt). African Americans and middle-aged and older adults should also eat no more than 1500 mg of sodium per day. The reason is that these groups have a high risk of developing hypertension.

\*\*These DASH guidelines are for someone eating 2000 calories each day.

Notice that all four eating plans limit the amount of sodium you should eat each day to about 1 tsp of salt (2/3 tsp for people with hypertension or at risk for hypertension). Most of the salt we eat each day actually comes from processed foods rather than salt that we add to foods that we cook. Make sure to check the sodium content on the Nutrition Facts label when buying food. The sodium content in similar

foods can vary a lot. For instance, the sodium content in regular tomato soup may be 700 mg per cup in one brand and 1100 mg per cup in another brand. Choosing the brands with lower sodium content can be one way to lower the amount of sodium you eat.

Another way to limit sodium is to use spices other than salt. There are plenty of salt-free spice combinations that you can find in your grocery store. It may



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take awhile for you to get used to the taste. But give it time. After awhile, you may like them better than salt.

Besides limiting the amount of sodium you eat, it is also a good idea to eat foods rich in potassium (puh-TASS-e-uhm). A potassium-rich diet blunts the harmful effects of sodium on blood pressure. Aim to eat 4700 mg of potassium a day. Foods rich in potassium include fruits and vegetables, especially:

- tomatoes and tomato products
- orange juice and grapefruit juice
- raisins, dates, prunes
- white potatoes and sweet potatoes
- lettuce
- papayas

Check out the potassium list in the Nutrient List section of the USDA National Nutrient Database for more foods rich in potassium.

**Q: I've heard that eating fish is good for my heart. Why is that?**

**A:** Fish and shellfish contain a type of fat called omega-3 (oh-MAY-guh) fatty acids. Research suggests that eating omega-3 fatty acids lowers your chances of dying from heart disease. Fish that naturally contain more oil (such as salmon, trout, herring, mackerel, anchovies, and sardines) have more omega-3 fatty acids than lean fish (such as cod, haddock, and catfish). Be careful, though, about eating too much shellfish. Shrimp is a type of shellfish that has a lot of cholesterol.

You can also get omega-3 fatty acids from plant sources, such as:

- canola oil
- soybean oil
- walnuts
- ground flaxseed (linseed) and flaxseed oil

**Q: Is drinking alcohol bad for my heart?**

**A:** Drinking too much alcohol can, over time, damage your heart and raise your blood pressure. If you drink alcohol, you should do so moderately. For women, moderate drinking means one drink per day. For men, it means two drinks per day. One drink counts as:

- 5 ounces of wine
- 12 ounces of beer
- 1½ ounces of 80-proof hard liquor

Research suggests that moderate drinkers are less likely to develop heart disease than people who don't drink any alcohol or who drink too much. Red wine drinkers in particular seem to be protected to some degree against heart disease. Red wine contains flavonoids (FLAY-vuh-noidz), which are thought to prevent plaque buildup. Flavonoids also are found in:

- red grapes
- berries
- apples
- broccoli

On the other hand, drinking more than one drink per day increases the risks of certain cancers, including breast cancer. And if you are pregnant, could become pregnant, or have another health condition that could make alcohol use harmful, you should not drink.



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With the help of your doctor, decide whether moderate drinking to lower heart attack risk outweighs the possible increased risk of breast cancer or other medical problems.

**Q: I need help working out an eating plan that's right for me. Who can I ask for help?**

**A:** You may want to talk with a registered dietitian. A dietitian is a nutrition expert who can give you advice about what foods to eat and how much of each type. Ask your doctor to recommend a dietitian. You also can contact the American Dietetic Association (see the resources section for more information).

**Q: Besides eating healthy foods, what else can I do to keep my heart healthy?**

**A:** To reduce your risk of heart disease:

- Quit smoking — talk with your doctor or nurse if you need help quitting.
- Get at least 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate aerobic physical activity each week. For more information on physical activity, see the Fitness and Nutrition section on [womenshealth.gov](http://womenshealth.gov).
- Lose weight if you are overweight, and keep a healthy weight.
- Get your blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels checked regularly. For guidance on how often you should get tested, see Screening Tests and Immunizations Guidelines for Women on [womenshealth.gov](http://womenshealth.gov). ■

