

Eight Steps to a Heart-Healthier Diet

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Enjoy spaghetti with red sauce and a glass of wine? Bean burritos? Grilled fish? Zucchini, spinach, or any other vegetable sautéed in olive oil and garlic? Then heart-healthy eating is for you.

If your diet isn't so stellar right now, no worries! We'll help you craft a way of eating that you really enjoy and that fits into your lifestyle. And instead of changing your entire diet overnight—an approach that generally backfires—we're giving you eight steps. Which will allow you to ease into a heart-protective diet gradually and make changes that really stick.

You'll be watching portion sizes. We'll help you, by recommending specific servings sizes—and number of servings—for each food group you'll be working on. So, it's not a "diet" in the traditional sense, but if you follow our portion recommendations, those of you who need to lose weight will naturally cut calories.

If you're overweight, reducing down to "normal" weight may seem nearly impossible, especially if you've been on the diet rollercoaster a few times. But keep in mind, you don't have to fit into your prom dress (or tux) to make a difference to your heart. Losing just five percent of your body weight may be enough to help reduce your risk for heart disease, and losing 15 percent may help dramatically reduce risk— up to 45 percent .

Step One: Fill your plate with fruits and vegetables, 5 servings a day.

Step Two: Make 50% more of your grains whole.

Step Three: Nosh on Nuts, 1 ounce a day

Step Four: Slash sodium, 2300 mg a day.

Step Five: Balance your daily fat intake

Step Six: Go with lean protein.

Step Seven: Take in at least two dairy servings daily

Step Eight: Set a daily "treat" calorie limit.

Step One: Fill your plate with fruits and vegetables.

Why? For one, fruits and vegetables fill you up on very few calories, which help manage weight, which, in turn, reduce heart disease risk. Though light in calories they contain upwards of 100,000 phytonutrients (beneficial plant compounds).

For instance, the allicin in garlic not only lowers LDL—the "bad" cholesterol carrier—but it helps prevent it from becoming oxidized. (Oxidized LDL is more likely to clog arteries.)

Anthocyanins, which give blackberries, blueberries, cherries, purple grapes, strawberries, raspberries and eggplant skin their red, blue and purple tones help make blood less likely to clot (which in turn can reduce risk of heart attacks and

stroke). This compound also raises HDL levels, the “good” cholesterol carrier, which whisks this substance out of your body.

Old-fashioned vitamins and minerals also pull their weight when it comes to preserving your heart. For instance, fruits and vegetables are rich in potassium, a mineral that helps reduce blood pressure, and many are good sources of the antioxidant vitamin C. They all contain fiber, also linked with lowering heart disease risk.

How: Aim to get two servings of fruit and at least three servings of vegetables daily. **A serving is a half-cup raw or cooked and comes to about 25 calories.** That loosely translates to a medium-sized fruit, such as an orange or medium apple, or half a large fruit, such as a banana or large mango. And because salad greens are so low calorie, 2 cups of salad greens equal a half-cup of chopped vegetables.

Getting your “five a day” isn’t so hard:

Breakfast: 1/2 cup berries topping your cereal (1 fruit serving)

Lunch: 1 cup baby carrots (2 vegetables servings) with your lunch, followed by an orange (1 fruit serving)

Dinner: a side of spinach sautéed in olive oil and garlic (1 vegetable serving)

Although all fruits and vegetables are nutritious, make sure to include berries, citrus, eggplant, tomatoes and the “cruciferous” vegetables (e.g., arugula, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, kale, mustard greens) as they’re especially linked to heart protection. Include a wide variety of types and colors, as each specializes in its own brand of phytonutrients, vitamins and minerals.

Step Two: Make more of your grains whole.

Why: Oatmeal has grabbed the spotlight as the heart-healthy whole grain, but really all whole grains deserve top billing. People who eat more whole grains—about three servings daily—have a 30 to 50 percent reduction in heart disease risk over those eating little to none. White rice, white flour and other refined grains are stripped of most nutrients. (“Enriched” refined grains have some B vitamins and iron added back, but no phytonutrients or fiber.)

Oatmeal, barley and psyllium offer a special cholesterol-lowering advantage because they’re particularly rich in a type of fiber called “soluble” or “viscous” fiber. This type of fiber forms a thick gel in the gut, trapping bile acid, a substance produced by your body to help break down fat in the diet. Bile acid is made from cholesterol, so when it hitches a ride out of the body with viscous fiber (instead of being reabsorbed as it normally is), the body draws from your blood cholesterol to make more bile acid, thus lowering LDL. In addition, viscous fiber traps some of the fat and cholesterol from the diet, sending it out of the body before it can be absorbed.

All whole grains appear to have a weight loss advantage over refined grains. Their fiber makes them more satiating, meaning you feel fuller, longer for the calories.

How: Have five grain servings per day if your daily calorie level ranges from 1,500 to 1,800. Above 1,800 calories per day, start with six grain servings, and tack on more as your calorie needs increase. **A serving is about 80 calories, which is approximately a half-cup** of cooked pasta, rice or other grain, and a medium slice of bread. Cereals vary so widely in calories that you must check the label to figure out how much you get for 80 calories.

Although legumes (such as black beans, lentils and pinto beans), sweet potatoes, potatoes and peas aren't grains, they are so close nutritionally, that they fall in the grain group as well. Therefore, you should **consider 1/2 cup each serving**. Beans are especially heart healthy.

Now figure out what percent of your grains are whole grains—aim to reach at least 50 percent. If you're already there, raise it to 75 percent. It's difficult to maintain a solid 100 percent if you eat out much—restaurants rarely have 100 percent whole grain bread or pasta, and many serve only white rice.

Tricky food labels can make it difficult to know if you're getting a whole-grain product. For instance, **"multigrain" does not necessarily mean whole grain**. Think about it—the bread, cereal or other product can be made of a multitude of refined grains!

Step Three: Nosh on nuts.

Why: You might think it's, well, a little *nuts* to recommend that you eat such a high calorie food on this plan. After all, calorie control is key to a healthy heart. Nuts are particularly satiating. And research is indicating that we may not absorb nuts all that well, so some of those calories leave the body.

But the most compelling reason to make nuts a staple is because the nuts that are lower in saturated fat (such as almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, pecans, certain pine nuts, and pistachio nuts) can help lower LDL and are linked with reduced risk of heart disease. However, not all nuts meet the low saturated fat requirements, including Brazil nuts, macadamia nuts, cashew nuts and certain varieties of pine nuts. All nuts contain healthy fats, like monounsaturated fat and omega-3s. In addition to phytonutrients, vitamins and minerals, many nuts are rich in the amino acid arginine. In the body, it converts to nitric oxide, which helps relax the blood vessels and lower blood pressure. **Eating nuts can reduce inflammation; chronic inflammation is not only a trigger for heart disease but for cancer and other chronic diseases.**

How: The amount of nuts you can eat depends partly on the number of calories you can get away with and still maintain a healthy weight (or lose weight, if you need to). A good place to start is with **an ounce—about 3 tablespoons—of unoiled, unsalted nuts per day (or 1 1/2 tablespoons peanut butter, almond butter or other nut butter—again, unsalted is healthier)**. This comes to about 150 calories. If you're adding that amount to your diet, make sure to cut 150 calories elsewhere. (Potato chips, soda and other junk food would be a good place to start!)

Breakfast: If cereal and nonfat milk tend to be your breakfast staples, **topping your bowl with nuts** not only adds satisfying crunch, but the healthy fat helps keep you feeling fuller longer throughout the morning. You get the same effect if you **throw in a tablespoon or two of almonds, almond butter or peanut butter into a banana/yogurt breakfast smoothie.**

Lunch and Dinner: Roasted, unsalted **nuts add texture and taste to salads, grain pilafs, fruit salads** and many other dishes. **Crushed nuts make a wonderful coating for baked fish and chicken, and can even serve as a mock piecrust.** And, of course, peanut butter and almond butter are classics with thinly sliced banana, apple or pear in a sandwich.

Snack: **Plain nuts, roasted nuts, nuts with dried fruit, nuts topping yogurt and fresh fruit, a teaspoon or two of nut butter on apple, or banana slices**—nuts are a natural snack food. Although almonds, peanuts and walnuts are the most well-researched when it comes to heart protection, all nuts are nutritious. So go ahead and mix it up with pistachios, pecans and any other types. Seeds, such as pumpkin and sunflower seeds, are also nutrient powerhouses, so include them as well.

Step Four: Slash Sodium

Why: Excess **sodium** raises blood pressure by hanging onto fluid, increasing blood volume, which taxes the heart.

How: We'll be honest with you, capping sodium at 2,300 milligrams (mg) per day—the recommended upper limit for people *without* heart disease or high blood pressure—is really tough. And if you do have these conditions, you're supposed to limit sodium to 1,500 mg; nearly impossible to achieve unless you prepare all your meals at home.

That's because packaged, processed foods, and most restaurant foods, are absolutely teeming with sodium. That said, getting down to 2,300 mg is definitely doable if you consistently follow the strategies below. **“Even if you're in the group that should be maxing out at 1,500 mg, start by making 2,300 mg your goal. Take it step-by-step, allowing your taste buds to get used to lower sodium foods,”**

- Buy raw. As much as possible, buy raw fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry and fish, and prepare them yourself. That way, you're starting out with virtually no sodium.
- Buy “no salt added.” Frozen vegetables, canned beans, canned tomatoes and many other canned vegetables now come in no-salt-added versions.
- Compare labels and choose lower sodium foods. When you can't get a no-salt-added product, buy the one lowest in sodium. Cook without salt, but use a salt shaker at the table if you must.
- Choose lower sodium options at restaurants. If it's a chain with nutrition info posted online, pick out lower sodium options—if they exist! In restaurants

without nutrition information, ask the server if there are any dishes that are not pre-seasoned, like grilled salmon or chicken, and request them salt-free. Skip soups and make your own salad dressing with olive oil and vinegar, instead of prepared dressings.

Step Five: Balance your daily fat intake ("polys," "monos" & "sats")

Why: Research suggests that it's not the just *total* fat but the *type* of fat that may make a difference.

Fat 101: High-fat foods, such as vegetable oil, butter, nuts and avocados contain a combination of three types of fat: monounsaturated, polyunsaturated and saturated fat. Some foods also contain trans fat.

Monounsaturated fat: Monounsaturated fat helps support healthy triglyceride levels. Research shows that monounsaturated fats may also raise levels of HDL, the "good" cholesterol that sends cholesterol out of the body, without raising levels of artery-clogging LDL .

Polyunsaturated fat: In general, polyunsaturated fats have a positive effect on blood cholesterol, decreasing LDL levels. Because polys can also lower HDL levels, the Smart Balance Food Plan balances polyunsaturated fat intake and limits total calories from polyunsaturated fat to 10 percent.

Omega-3 polys provide essential fatty acids. (Essential fatty acids are those our body cannot make by converting other fats, so, like vitamins, we need to take them in from our diets.) Omega-3s have been shown to help support healthy triglyceride levels and overall heart health. The **types of omega-3s in fish—docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA)—are more potent than the plant-based omega-3—alpha-linolenic acid (ALA)**. But ALA has also been shown to be protective, so if you don't eat fish, and can't take fish oils because you're a vegetarian/vegan or are allergic, then be sure to look for plant-based sources. **Omega-6 polys** also provide essential fatty acids.. However, some studies indicate that in excess, **omega-6s may trigger inflammation**, so it's important to maintain moderation.

Saturated fat: Saturated fats play a part in an overall healthy diet. They are needed to help balance monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids in the diet and to maintain a healthy ratio of LDL to HDL cholesterol, although excess amounts can raise LDL levels.

Trans fat: Trans fat is the most risky type of fat. Studies have shown that trans fat may raise LDL, lower HDL, and contribute to inflammation and possibly deposits of visceral, or deep belly fat, which have been linked to heart disease and other health risks 2,9. **You should avoid trans fat in your diet.**

Cholesterol: *Technically cholesterol is not a fat, but it's worth mentioning because, in excess, it can raise LDL. The American Heart Association recommends limiting cholesterol to no more than 300 mg daily. Cholesterol is found only in foods of animal origin; so, for example, olive oil and peanut butter do not contain it, but meat, seafood and dairy do.*

How: Avoid foods made with partially hydrogenated oil. This oil is the main source of unhealthy trans fat. Just because the nutrition label lists "0 g trans" doesn't mean you're in the clear. A legal loophole allows companies to make that claim even if there's 0.49 g of trans fat per serving. Just four times this amount—2 g of trans fat daily—has been shown to adversely impact blood cholesterol levels. Fortunately, companies have been removing partially hydrogenated fat from food, but you'll still find it in some margarines, piecrusts, cookies, cakes, candy, fried food and frozen food. "Hydrogenated oil" does not contain trans fat, but can be high in saturated fat.

Step Six: Go with lean protein

Barbecuing, broiling, grilling, frying or other high temperature cooking of meats—fatty or lean—may create cancer-causing chemicals .

Why: Fatty cuts of red meat are major sources of saturated fat, you should try to limit red meat and processed meats. Processed meat, like hotdogs and salami proved to be equally risky as red meat.

How: Eat more fish and vegetarian sources of protein and less red meat (beef, pork and lamb). When eating red meat, choose lean cuts and limit portion sizes. Avoid or limit processed meats such as bacon, bologna, hot dogs, pepperoni, salami and sausage.

Step Seven: Take in at least two dairy servings daily

Why: Dairy products are an excellent source of protein and important vitamins and minerals such as calcium and Vitamin D. Including dairy in your diet can help to promote bone health.

New and emerging research examining links between food and heart disease find that people who consume the most dairy foods may have a 13 percent lower risk of dying, period, from any disease, and a seven percent lower risk of dying from heart disease and 11 percent lower risk of stroke compared to those eating the least.

One reason for the possible protection: Dairy products may help lower blood pressure. Dairy products—and in some research, calcium from supplements—may help regulate weight, another plus for your heart

How: Have two dairy servings daily (two or three if you're taking in 2,000 calories or more). If you don't like—or can't tolerate—dairy foods, substitute soy milk containing at least 25 percent of the daily value for calcium and for vitamin D. While almond milk is also OK, note that it doesn't have nearly the protein in milk or soy milk, so be sure to have another source of protein at that meal.

A serving is 86–100 calories, and includes:

- 1 cup nonfat or 1% milk
- 1 cup calcium- and vitamin D-enriched soymilk
- 3/4 cup nonfat or low-fat plain yogurt
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Although a skim or 1% latte is a great way to score a dairy serving; don't fool yourself into thinking that sugary coffee drinks with through-the-roof calories count! **Even vanilla yogurt, or fruit yogurts are more of a dessert than a dairy serving because of all the sugar.** However, plain yogurt with fresh fruit, nuts and a little honey makes a very nutritious breakfast, and that's a great way to spend your dairy servings.

Although cheddar, Swiss and other cheeses are great sources of calcium, they are also high in saturated fat. If eating cheese, choose reduced-fat versions. Because these can still be high in saturated fat, eat limited amounts of these cheeses.

Step Eight: Set a daily "treat" calorie limit.

Why: It's no news to you that sweets and salty snacks can pack on the pounds

Sugar-sweetened beverages, like soda, sugary iced teas and punch have received the most intense research scrutiny and the findings aren't good. Preliminary, but not conclusive, research has shown that these drinks may be linked to high blood pressure, high triglycerides, inflammation and heart disease . Some studies indicate that even diet drinks may contribute to metabolic syndrome (a cluster of symptoms including high triglycerides and excess visceral fat) and diabetes—two conditions that greatly raise the likelihood of developing heart disease .

How: Set a daily treat limit. We recommend the following:

Daily calories	Daily treat calories
1,500 to 1,600	100
Above 1,600 to 1,800	150
Above 1,800 to 2,000	200
	250
Above 2,000 to 2,500	

A treat doesn't have to be nutritious, but to spare your arteries, avoid those made with partially hydrogenated oil. Our suggestions: flavored yogurt; hot cocoa; dark

chocolate; light ice cream; a glass of red wine (unless you have a condition that precludes alcohol consumption); or a fruit and yogurt smoothie. While a soda (or just part of a soda) is fair game, given its checkered health history, we recommend limiting it to just a few times a week or cutting it out altogether. Same for diet soda; don't drink it unless it's necessary to help wean you off regular soda. And, after you've quit regular soda, try and ease off diet.

Set up your environment for success!!

- Get rid of all the temptations in your home, office and car.
- Make a plan. Because sugary and salty snacks are everywhere, if you're susceptible to these foods, you must arm yourself with a strategy to avoid and resist. Decide in advance what type of treat you're going to have that day. Writing out your plan, keeping it with you, and referring to it when you're tempted to stray can be very helpful.
- Break habits such as a 3:00 p.m. trip to the vending machine or a morning coffee and muffin—this will help tamp down cravings.
- When cravings hit, distract yourself by taking a short walk—just around the block can do it, calling a friend, sending an email, browsing the web, picking up a book or magazine, listening to music, or something else that's completely unrelated to food.

Changing the way you eat may be one of your biggest challenges, especially if you started out with an unhealthy diet and/or weight to lose. But we hope that breaking it up into eight smaller chunks has made the challenge a little easier and that some of the habits are sticking.