

## Top Foods for a Healthy Heart

You can reduce your risk for heart disease considerably by eating the following foods on a regular basis. Eating several of them has a synergistic effect on your heart and the rest of your body.

### Vegetables

\* **Dark green vegetables (spinach, kale, broccoli, asparagus).** For so little calories you get so many valuable nutrients such as fiber, vitamins A, C, and folic acid and minerals such as potassium, magnesium, and some calcium. Enjoy them steamed or sautéed in olive oil. Spinach and kale can also be added to smoothies for an added nutritional boost.

\* **Tomatoes** are loaded with vitamins A and C and also contain potassium, folic acid, fiber, and antioxidants lycopene and lutein. Ever notice that tomatoes have four chambers just like heart? Snack on them raw, add to salads and sandwiches, or cook them with added fat such as olive oil to absorb even more of those healthy antioxidants.

\* **Carrots** are an excellent source of vitamin A and fiber. While the most common color is orange, purple carrots are becoming more readily available. Munch on them raw, add to salads, or cook them to absorb more of the vitamin A content.

\* **Sweet potatoes** are a powerhouse of nutrients! They are an excellent source of vitamins A and C, folic acid, potassium, and fiber. The fiber in them also digests more slowly compared to white potatoes. Bake, mash or roast them just like regular potatoes.

\* **Winter squash (acorn, butternut, spaghetti, etc..)** are under-appreciated vegetables that deliver a rich source of vitamins A and C, folic acid, potassium, magnesium, and fiber. Bake or roast them for a delicious comfort food on a chilly day.

### Fruit

\* **Berries (blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, cranberries)** are excellent sources of vitamin C, potassium, fiber, and powerful antioxidants and phytochemicals. The antioxidants help increase nitric oxide, which relaxes blood vessels and helps lower blood pressure. Berries may also increase HDL cholesterol. Enjoy these on their own, mixed with other fruit, on salads, in yogurt, in smoothies, on hot or cold cereal, or my children's favorite—with a dollop of real whipped cream.

\* An apple a day may actually help keep heart disease away! **Apples** are associated with a lower risk of both heart disease and stroke, mainly due to their strong antioxidant flavonoids that help reduce the oxidation of LDL cholesterol. They are also high in pectin, a soluble fiber that helps lower cholesterol.

\* **Bananas** are an easy, economical, and rich source of potassium, which helps lower blood pressure. Eat by themselves, with a spoonful of nut butter, or freeze and use in smoothies.

\* **Oranges** are a rich and delicious source of vitamin C, potassium, folic acid, and soluble fiber. Whether it's navel oranges or the cute, little mandarin oranges enjoy them on their own or mixed with other fruits.

## Whole Grains

\* **Oatmeal** is high in soluble fiber which helps reduce and keep cholesterol lower. Also a good source of potassium and magnesium. To help regulate blood sugar levels, stick to old-fashioned oats or steel-cut oats and limit added sugars. Top with chopped nuts and fruit for a delicious breakfast meal.

\* **Brown rice** is high in many B vitamins, magnesium, and fiber to help with lowering blood pressure and cholesterol. Make a big batch and heat up for a quick side dish during the week.

\* **Quinoa**, a pseudo-grain, is a complete protein that is lower in carbohydrates but still a great source of fiber. It is also gluten-free. Quinoa can be easily exchanged for rice in many recipes and cooks in only about 15 minutes. Rinse it before cooking to remove the bitter saponins.

## Lean Protein

\* **Yogurt** is a great source of calcium which helps to keep blood pressure in a healthy range. As an added bonus, yogurt is one of the top foods to help keep weight in check. The protein helps with satiety and the probiotics (healthy bacteria) help with digestion and reducing inflammation. Yogurt makes a great snack because of its healthy carb plus protein combo. It's also great for a healthy breakfast topped with chopped nuts and fruit. Stick to lowfat and fat-free versions to reduce saturated fat and yogurts with little to no added sugars.

\* **Dry beans** (black, pinto, cannellini, etc...) are another under-appreciated category of foods, yet they are a powerhouse of nutrients. They are great source of protein with no saturated fat, contain healthy carbs that don't spike your blood sugars, and are rich in soluble fiber that helps lower cholesterol. Cook and season with olive oil, herbs and spices and add to soups, chilis, and salads for a nutrition boost.

## Healthy Fats

\* **Salmon and Tuna** and other fatty, cold-water fish are high in EPA and DHA, types of Omega-3 fats that help lower triglycerides and help stabilize heart rhythm. Studies show that eating 6 to 8 ounces of fish high in omega-3 fats is associated with a 30% reduction in developing heart disease. Enjoy this fish

baked, grilled, or sautéed in olive oil. Salmon and tuna in cans or pouches are also economical ways to consume this healthy fat (and are most often wild), but are higher in sodium.

\* **Nuts** are another powerhouse of nutrients. Once considered forbidden because of their high-fat content, nuts are now encouraged by dietitians to be eaten regularly. They are rich in monounsaturated fats that help lower “lousy” LDL cholesterol and increase “healthy” HDL cholesterol. Nuts are also a great source of protein, fiber, vitamin E, folic acid, potassium, and magnesium. Eating a handful of nuts four or more times a week is also associated with a reduced risk for heart disease. They make a great snack, are good topped on hot and cold cereal and salads or roasted and paired with steamed vegetables.

\* Using **olive oil** daily has been shown in many clinical trials to reduce the risk of heart disease—sometimes as high as 30%. It is high in monounsaturated fat, which helps lower cholesterol and raise “healthy” HDL cholesterol. Drizzle on vegetables or bread, use in salad dressings, or for cooking food at medium heat or less. Can also be used as a substitute for butter when baking (about 25% less is needed).

#### **Other tantalizing goodies:**

\* **Green Tea** is rich in antioxidants that help reduce the risk for both heart disease and stroke. Studies show that people who drink 12 ounces or more a day have a significantly lower risk of heart disease. Drink it hot or cold—just limit added sugars.

\* **Last but not least...Dark chocolate!** Can't leave this one out! Dark chocolate with greater than 70% cocoa provides many heart-healthy benefits such as improving blood flow to your heart and brain, making blood platelets less sticky and less likely to form clots, lowering blood pressure, reducing inflammation, reducing oxidation, and calming stress hormones. Enjoy it often but in small quantities!