

Lower your risk with a Heart Healthy Diet

What should we eat for a healthy heart? *GHT* speaks to Dr. Benita Perch from the Integrated Medicine Institute in Hong Kong on how to eat if you have heart disease.



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“Switching to a vegan diet is probably the single most effective thing those who are already ill can do.”

There have been substantive reports that a Mediterranean diet can reduce heart risks by up to 30 percent. Do you agree with this? How does it compare to a normal low-fat diet?

Yes, I do agree. A Mediterranean or slightly modified Mediterranean diet is very effective and sustainable. A normal low-fat diet recommends decreasing all the fats in one's diet, whereas the Mediterranean diet includes “good” fats, like omega 3, 6 and 9 derived from nuts and seeds, fish and olive oil. It also excludes “bad” saturated and trans-fats.

Olive oil seems to be the main staple of Mediterranean food that reduces heart disease risks. Why is it so helpful in this regard?

Extra virgin olive oil is especially heart-healthy because it's rich in polyphenols and monosaturated fats. It's not only the use of olive oil itself, but also its use as a substitute for things like butter and cheese, which are high in saturated fats, that provides the protective effect. Too much olive oil will still cause weight gain, as it is a type of fat, so it needs to be used in moderation.

I recommend you don't use olive oil if you're cooking over a high heat. Olive oil has a lower smoking point – the point at which oil literally begins to smoke – than some other types. In fact, it starts to smoke between 185° and 215°C. The beneficial compounds in olive oil begin to degrade and potentially health-harming compounds form when you heat olive oil to its smoking point. However, it is an excellent choice if you're making salad dressing or sautéing vegetables over a medium heat.

Briefly, what are the differences between low-density lipoprotein (LDL or “bad” cholesterol) and high-density lipoprotein (HDL or “good” cholesterol)? How can we minimise LDL and increase HDL?

Cholesterol can't dissolve in the blood. It has to be transported to and from the cells by carriers called lipoproteins. When too much LDL cholesterol circulates in the blood, it can slowly accumulate on the inner walls of the arteries that feed the heart and brain. This leads to atherosclerosis. About one third or fourth of blood cholesterol is carried by HDL, which is known as “good” cholesterol, because high levels of it seem to protect against heart attack. On the other hand, low levels of HDL (less than 40 mg/dL) also increase the risk of heart disease. Medical experts think that HDL tends to carry cholesterol away from the arteries and back to the liver, where it's passed from the body. Some of them believe HDL removes excess cholesterol from arterial plaque, slowing its build up.

The best way to minimize LDL and lift HDL levels is to eat a healthy diet – one that is rich in fruit, vegetables, whole grains, legumes and good fats – while minimising refined carbohydrates, sugar, animal protein (especially red meat that has not been grass-fed), saturated and trans-fats. Exercise is also essential, as it raises HDL. Where supplements are concerned, omega 3 fish oil, fibre, lecithin, garlic and vitamin E are all useful, among others.

What is the difference between saturated fat and trans-fat and their effects on the body?

Saturated fats tend to be solid at room temperature and they are found mainly in animal fats and dairy products. Saturated fats and vegetable oils from the agricultural industry, such as meat from animals that were fed grain instead of grass, are the most detrimental to your health. Historically, diets high in lard, cream, butter, etc., did not lead to cardiovascular disease. That was prior to the agriculture industry as a whole changing animal feedstuff from grass to grain. Grass-fed meat contains conjugated linoleic acid and omega 3s, which balance out the saturated fats, whereas most of a cow's fat changes to saturated fats when it has been eating corn for three days

Trans-fats seemed like such a good thing once upon a time. They enhanced the flavour, texture, and shelf life of many processed foods, from cookies to frozen pizza. Unfortunately, they come with a health risk. Trans fatty foods tantalise your taste buds, then they travel through your digestive system to your arteries, where they turn to sludge.

Small amounts of trans-fats occur naturally in beef, lamb and full-fat dairy products. But most of them come from processing liquid vegetable oil into a solid fat. They are also formed by repeatedly frying food in the same oil container, a common practice in fast-food restaurants.

Is a vegan diet an effective way to reduce heart risks?

Yes, it is a very effective diet if done right. Much research has been done by Dean Ornish on a low-fat vegan diet and cardiovascular disease. His results are outstanding. In some cases, cardiovascular disease has been fully reversed. Switching to a vegan diet is probably the single most effective thing those who are already ill can do.

Does reducing sodium intake significantly lower heart risks?

Sodium in itself is not bad, but the over-consumption of it is linked to high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.

Of all the dietary adjustments one can make, which in your opinion are the most important?

The most important dietary adjustment one can make is to remove sugar and refined carbohydrates from one's diet, followed closely by also removing agri-industry meat and dairy products, and, of course, anything containing trans or partially hydrogenated oils.

Is diet the most important aspect of a healthy heart? Or are genetics, exercise, and lifestyle just as important?

They all work in tandem. Genetics can be

overcome with the right diet, exercise, sufficient sleep and stress reduction, but they are equally important. I know many high-powered individuals who have eaten right and exercised, yet they remained under considerable stress and had heart attacks.

In your opinion, by what percentage can adjusting your diet really reduce heart risk?

There is no definite answer. It depends on the individual. But I would probably say around 50 percent, if it is accompanied by exercise and stress reduction.

Finally, what kind of diet would you recommend for someone with a high risk of heart disease?

I would recommend a vegan diet for someone who is already ill with atherosclerosis and a high chance of a heart attack and stroke. For someone with a high risk, due to genetics or other factors, then a modified Mediterranean diet, which includes limited amounts and specific types, such as meat from grass-fed animals and not grain-fed ones, as well as limited amounts of fat and dairy products. *GHT*



A Mediterranean diet