

Eat Smart for your Heart



This month, we're seeing "red" as we focus on our heart and ways we can keep it healthy. February is American Heart Month, and it's important to know steps we can take to protect ourselves against heart disease. Eating a healthy diet is key, along with regular exercise, avoiding tobacco use and annual visits with your healthcare provider for a wellness exam.

Eating a heart-healthy diet is one of the most effective ways to improve or maintain your heart health. Here are seven steps you can take to improve your heart health by eating a healthy diet:

1 Choose Lower Fat Meats & Protein Sources

Many studies have shown that too much saturated fat in your diet can lead to high cholesterol. Saturated fat is found most commonly in foods from animals, such as high-fat cuts of meat, butter and lard, and whole-milk dairy products. Saturated fat is also found in vegetable and coconut oil. It's best to limit these products in your diet or choose healthier alternatives like lean fish and skim milk.

2 Increase Fiber

Fiber in your diet is good for your overall health, but may be especially beneficial for your heart health! Good sources of fiber include fresh vegetables, fruit with skin, beans and legumes, and whole grains. Add fiber to your diet by adding berries to your cereal or black beans to your salad, or choosing whole fruit instead of fruit juice.

3 Add Plant Stanols or Sterols

Plant stanols and sterols have been shown to lower your cholesterol when included in your diet. They naturally occur in many plants and have also been added to certain margarines and other products, like orange juice. Next time, choose a product that contains plant stanols or sterols to improve your heart health!

4 Avoid Trans Fat

Trans fat can raise your cholesterol levels, similar to saturated fat. Trans fat is found in foods made with hydrogenated oils, such as stick margarine, shortening, fried foods, donuts and pastries. Choose foods that say "No trans fat" or "trans fat-free."

5 Aim for a Healthy Weight

Being overweight increases your chances of developing high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and other health problems. Losing weight can help improve your cholesterol levels. Control your portion sizes and calorie intake to reach a healthy weight to improve your heart health!

6 Hold the Salt

High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease. Many studies have found that reducing the amount of sodium in your diet can help lower your blood pressure. Limit the amount of salt in your diet by using spices and herbs instead. Also, pay attention to food labels and choose products with lower sodium.

7 Choose Healthy Fats Instead

Olive oil, canola oil, nuts, olives, avocados and fatty fish are common sources of healthier fats. Aim to include healthy fish in your diet twice a week and replace oils like vegetable and coconut oil with olive oil and canola oil.

Learn more about American Heart Month and tips for staying healthy from the American Heart Association at www.heart.org. Cooking Light offers some basics on eating heart healthy at www.cookinglight.com, and we've also included some heart-healthy recipes you can try at home!

Just visit the *Be Healthy* section of our website at: www.bcbsms.com and click on this article. Show your heart some love this February! Be heart healthy!