

Heart Health

This fact sheet contains practical up-to-date information about how to keep your heart-healthy by making the right food and drink choices.

Healthy lifestyle habits are important for a healthy heart such as eating a healthy diet, physical activity, stopping smoking, drinking less alcohol and maintaining a healthy weight.

Enjoy a variety of fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables provide vitamins, minerals, fibre and other plant nutrients such as antioxidants that help protect your heart. Fresh, frozen, tinned and dried varieties all count. Aim to include five or more portions each day. A portion is:

- three heaped tablespoons of vegetables
- a dessert bowl of salad
- two small fruits such as plums or satsumas or one larger fruit like an apple, an orange, peach or medium banana
- a handful of grapes, cherries or berries
- a 150ml glass of 100% unsweetened fruit juice
- a handful, about 30g, of dried fruit

Supplements don't have the same benefits as eating fruit or vegetables. View our Supplements Food Fact Sheet.

Pulses (beans, peas and lentils) release their energy slowly which is thought to be good for heart health. Soya, soya products and oats may also have additional benefits.

Eat more fish

Omega-3 is a type of polyunsaturated fat that appears to have benefits for heart-health. It comes in two forms, one of which is found in oily fish. Aim to have two portions of fish a week, one of which should be an oily fish.

Understanding fats

There are several types of fats in the diet and these have different effects on the heart. Eating less fat overall in our diets has a beneficial effect on blood fat levels.

Trans fats found in processed foods are associated with increased risk of heart disease. Eating less processed and takeaway foods is a good way to eat less trans fats. So is cooking from scratch using more fresh ingredients.

Types of oily fish	Tips on how to eat oily fish
Salmon – fresh, frozen or canned	Fishcakes and fish pie mix
Herrings – fresh or pickled	Soused – with salad, grilled with new potatoes and vegetables
Mackerel – fresh, canned or smoked	Flaked into rice salads or grilled with new potatoes and vegetables
Sardines – fresh or canned in oil or water	Grilled, BBQ, or canned sardines on toast
Pilchards – canned in tomato sauce	With pasta and green salad or on toast
Trout – fresh or smoked	Poached, grilled or baked
Kippers – fresh or vacuum packed	Poached for breakfast or supper
Tuna (only fresh or frozen varieties are rich in omega-3)	Grilled, with salads and in fish cakes

Alternative sources of omega-3 if you do not eat fish
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green leafy vegetables especially broccoli, spinach or cabbage • Soya or canola (rapeseed) oils • Walnuts, flaxseeds (linseeds) and their oils • Foods fortified with omega-3

Saturated fat is found mainly in animal products. Having a lot of saturated fat is linked with raised levels of harmful (LDL) cholesterol. Cut down on processed foods, eat more fruit, vegetables and starchy foods to reduce your saturated fat intake. Replacing saturated fat with moderate amounts of **monounsaturated fat** and **polyunsaturated fat** can also reduce harmful cholesterol.



Sources of fats	
Saturated fats	Polyunsaturated fats
Butter, ghee, lard, suet, dripping, cheese, cream full-fat milk and fat on meat and poultry. Processed foods such as burgers, sausages, pastry, pies, cakes, biscuits and rich puddings.	Sunflower, corn, soya and rapeseed oils. Spreads made from these oils Nuts and seeds.
Monounsaturated fats	Trans fats
Olive and rapeseed (canola) oils. Avocados. Some nuts including walnuts, almonds and pecans.	Processed foods (see Saturated Fat) Fast foods Takeaway foods

Aim for a healthy weight

If you can achieve a healthier weight you can improve your blood lipid levels. Start by increasing your physical activity and watching your portion sizes.

Top tips

- Aim for at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day
- Eat one portion of oily fish per week or include vegetarian sources of omega-3 regularly in your diet
- Eat more peas, beans, lentils and vegetables
- Limit processed foods, pastries, fried and fast food - choose healthy sandwiches or rolls, a baked potato or home-cooked food
- Cut down on fatty meat products (sausages, pies, pasties, sausage rolls and streaky bacon) – swap for unprocessed meat or fish
- Choose plant based spreads such as olive, rapeseed or sunflower oil and limit high-fat dairy foods (butter and cream, full fat milk, cheese and yoghurts)
- Use more wholegrains - high fibre bread, breakfast cereals, oats, brown rice and pasta, plus beans, peas and lentils
- Snack on fruit, fruit loaf, crumpets, dried fruit, nuts, seeds, low fat yoghurt, high fibre cereals and plain biscuits
- Keep salt intake low by eating less processed and takeaway foods, salty snacks such as crisps and nuts; canned and packet sauces, gravy products and condiments like ketchup
- Stick to the recommended alcohol limits (no more than 2-3 units/day for women, no more than 3-4 units/day men) and aim for two alcohol free days per week
- Be physically active for at least 30 minutes every day
- Do not smoke and avoid smoky environments.

Plant sterols and stanols

Some foods including fat spreads, milks and yoghurts, are fortified with plant sterols and stanols (natural plant substances which reduce the absorption of cholesterol in the gut). Following a diet low in saturated fats in combination with eating the recommended amounts of plant stanols and sterols each day (2g daily) may lower LDL cholesterol by 15%.

Choose wholegrain varieties

Base your meals on starchy foods (bread, potatoes, cereals, rice and pasta) and aim to include more wholegrain varieties of these foods to help lower heart disease risk.

Wholegrain starchy foods include the whole grain of wheat and oats also rice, barley, rye, wild rice, buckwheat and quinoa. Change white breads for wholemeal or granary breads, use brown rice and wholegrain breakfast cereals such as wheat bisks or bran flakes.

Eat/drink less sugar

Eat less sugary foods such as cakes, biscuits, sweets, chocolates, ice cream and sugary soft drinks to achieve a healthier weight and reduce the risk of developing heart disease.

Summary

If you decide to make changes, begin slowly with one or two suggestions. Remember, it is best to focus on improving your eating and exercise patterns as the main goal rather than aiming for weight loss. Dieting can lead to weight going up and down or 'yo-yoing' which is bad for your heart. By eating well and being active you may or may not lose weight – but you will improve your heart health even if your weight stays the same.

This Food Fact Sheet is a public service of The British Dietetic Association (BDA) intended for information only. It is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or dietary advice given by a dietitian.

If you need to see a dietitian, visit your GP for a referral or bda.uk.com/find-a-dietitian for a private dietitian. You can check your dietitian is registered at hcpc-uk.org.

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