

American Heart Association Healthy Diet Guidelines

It is important to pay attention to heart health all year long, and with February being Heart Health Month, now is a good time to establish a healthy eating plan.

The leading cause of death in the United States is heart disease. Following a heart-healthy diet is the best way to care for your heart. These guidelines are not just for those with heart disease or a history in their family, they are for everyone.

The American Heart Association (AHA) encourages the public to make heart-healthy decisions with their diet. The guidelines emphasize dietary patterns, not specific foods or nutrients. These guidelines don't focus on what you shouldn't be eating but what you should eat. This helps people develop an eating plan customized to their preferences and style.

Here are the nine diet and lifestyle recommendations intended to reduce cardiovascular disease risk:

1. Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight. Being obese or overweight causes strain on the heart. However, working toward weight loss with small, consistent dietary changes can majorly impact heart health. Balance the activities you do every day with the amount of calories you eat. Combine a healthy diet with 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week.
2. Eat plenty of vegetables and fruits: Various fruits and veggies provide adequate essential nutrients and phytochemicals. Whole, unprocessed vegetables, fruits, and grains are higher in plant sterols and fiber, which are important for gut health and cholesterol management. Deep orange, dark green, or yellow fruits and vegetables are especially nutritious.
3. Choose whole-grain foods: Select foods as close to their original form for maximum health benefits. Whole-grain foods contain all the essential nutrients and parts of the entire grain seed in their original proportions, including bran, germ, and endosperm. Some examples include brown rice, oats, and whole wheat bread.
4. Select healthy protein sources: The AHA suggests using plant protein sources, like nuts, beans, and seeds, rather than processed meats. If meat or poultry are desired, choose lean cuts and avoid processed forms. Add seafood and fish into the diet regularly, along with low-fat or fat-free dairy products.
5. Use liquid plant oils, like olive oil, rather than tropical oils, animal fats, and partially hydrogenated fats. Animal fats are solid at room temperature while plant oils are liquid at room temperature.
6. Choose minimally processed foods: Instead of consuming highly processed foods, the guidelines recommend choosing something healthier. Less processed food will have fewer ingredients listed on the label.

7. Sugar is everywhere, try to minimize beverages and foods with added sugars. Look at the ingredient list on the label.
8. Purchase and cook with foods with little or no salt: It isn't easy to find foods without much-added salt unless prepared from scratch. Salt intake should be less than 2,300 mg daily or 1,500 mg for those with higher blood pressure.
9. Limit intake if you choose to drink alcohol. One drink a day for women and 2 drinks a day for men is the recommended limit.

These guidelines can be applied both at home and when eating out. Improving lifestyle and dietary habits is a critical part of any cardiovascular risk reduction strategy.