

# The best (and worst) foods for heart health

No one wants to hear from their doctors that they have joined the millions of people across the globe to be diagnosed with heart disease. The Heart Foundation reports that heart disease, which includes diseases of the heart and cardiovascular system and stroke, is the No. 1 cause of death in the United States, affecting both men and women and most racial/ethnic groups. Heart disease also is one of the leading causes of death in Canada, claiming more than 33,000 lives per year.

Many factors contribute to the development of heart disease, including smoking, lack of exercise and stress. Diet and whether a person is overweight or obese also can have a direct link to heart health. Diet, particularly for those with diabetes and poorly controlled blood sugar levels, is a major concern.

A variety of foods are considered helpful for maintaining a strong and healthy heart and cardiovascular system, while others can contribute to conditions that may eventually lead to cardiovascular disease or cardiac arrest. Moderation enables a person to sample a little of everything, but not to make any one food a habit. The following are some foods to promote heart health and some foods you might want to avoid.

## Good

- **Tree nuts:** Tree nuts contain unsaturated fats that can help lower LDL cholesterol (the bad stuff) and improve HDL (the good stuff). Nuts also are a filling source of protein and other healthy nutrients.

- **Whole grains:** Whole grains contain complex carbohydrates for energy, as well as protein and

fiber. Fiber can help scrub cholesterol from the blood, lowering bad cholesterol levels.

- **Fatty fish:** Many cold-water, fatty fish, such as halibut, herring and salmon, contain omega-3 fatty acids, which are heart-healthy. Omega-3s also can be found in walnuts, flaxseed and some soy products.

- **Beans:** Beans and other legumes are an excellent source of protein and can be a stand-in for meats that are high in saturated fat. Beans also contain cholesterol-lowering soluble fiber and folate, which can reduce blood homocysteine levels. The Bean Institute reports that consuming beans may reduce cholesterol levels by roughly six to 10 percent.

- **Yogurt:** Researchers in Japan found yogurt may protect against gum disease. Left untreated, gum disease may elevate a person's risk for heart disease. Yogurt contains good bacteria that can counteract bad bacteria and boost immunity.

- **Raisins:** Raisins contain antioxidants that may help reduce inflammation. Inflammation is often linked to heart disease and other debilitating conditions. Fresh produce also is a good source of antioxidants.

## Poor

- **Fried foods:** Many fried foods have little nutritional value, as



they tend to be high in saturated and trans fats. French fries are particularly bad because they are carbohydrates fried and then doused in salt.

- **Sausage:** Processed meats have frequently earned a bad reputation among cardiologists, but sausage can be a big offender, due in large part to its high saturated fat content.

- **Red meats:** Enjoying a steak is probably not as bad as eating a deep-fried brownie, but it's best to limit red meat consumption to about 10 percent or less of your diet. Red meats can have a considerable amount of cholesterol, saturated fat and calories.

- **Added sugars:** Sugar can increase blood pressure and triglyceride levels. Sugar often

hides out in foods that you would not associate with the sweetener. Plus, many people unwittingly consume too much sugar simply through sugar-sweetened beverages and ready-to-eat cereals.

- **Salty foods:** Leave the salt shaker in the spice cabinet and opt for herbs for flavoring, advises the American Heart Association. High-sodium diets often are to blame for hypertension, a major risk factor for heart disease.

- **Dairy:** Artery-clogging saturated fat also can be found in dairy products, particularly the full-fat versions. Butter, sour cream and milk can be problematic when people overindulge. Opt for low-fat dairy when possible.