

Living healthy begins with eating right: Expert tips on nutrition

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A healthy diet consists of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins, along with limited sugars and saturated fats. Credit: Texas A&M AgriLife photo by Laura McKenzie

Maintaining a healthy diet is one of the best ways to improve overall

wellness and reduce the risk of chronic diseases, including heart disease, according to Texas A&M AgriLife experts.

Foods high in fat and sodium can contribute to risks of chronic diseases like [high blood pressure](#) and high cholesterol and affect heart health, said Carissa Wilhelm, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service program specialist with the agency's Healthy Texas initiative.

"High fat and high sodium foods consumed over time increase the risk for [heart attack](#) and stroke," she said.

Living healthy can begin with planning and preparation before heading to the grocery store.

Wilhelm teaches the online AgriLife Learn course Eating Well for Healthy Living. In this three-lesson course, participants learn to reduce stress through meal planning and physical activity. They also learn how to spend less and get more out of shopping at the grocery store, as well as how to safely store and prepare food.

Setting healthy eating goals

Wilhelm suggests setting SMART goals for dietary and nutritional health.

"SMART goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound," she said. "Keep those goals in sight and stay focused. Also, plan ahead for meals and snacks and avoid fast foods."

She said for those on a budget, in-season fruits and vegetables are usually less expensive.

"You can also opt for frozen or canned fruits and vegetables to save

money, but avoid those with added sugars or salt," Wilhelm said. "Using the nutrition facts label will help determine the serving size and how many servings you want. And following proper food safety measures can prevent food from going bad or to waste."

Ways to support healthy eating

"Good nutrition is necessary for keeping the body functioning normally, maintaining a healthy weight and reducing the risk of certain diseases, such as diabetes, [heart disease](#) and some cancers," said Rebecca Seguin-Fowler, Ph.D., professor and associate director of the Texas A&M AgriLife Institute for Advancing Health through Agriculture, Bryan-College Station. Fowler is a registered dietitian and certified strength and conditioning specialist.

Seguin-Fowler said dietary patterns, including those rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins, and limiting sugars and saturated fats help prevent many diet-related chronic diseases.

She also said [regular physical activity](#) is beneficial for lowering [blood pressure](#) and certain blood lipids such as LDL or "unhealthy" cholesterol.

"To gain these [health benefits](#), adults should participate in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week and include muscle-strengthening activities," she said. "This can be through brisk walking, recreational swimming, yoga or other moderate-intensity activities. Preferably, the activity should be spread out over the week."

Wilhelm added that many bad eating habits and compulsions come from stress or feelings of losing control.

"Another way to promote [healthy eating](#) and overall wellness is to take up some type of meditative practice and/or incorporate activities that

help you relax," she said. "Incorporating such a practice will help you reduce stress and promote healthy eating."

Maintaining heart health

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S., accounting for about one-fourth of all deaths annually. In the U.S., it is the No. 1 cause of death among women as well as men.

"While such statistics are alarming, heart disease is often preventable, and there are many things people can do to reduce their risk," Seguin-Fowler said. "These include knowing your risk, eating wisely, getting regular [physical activity](#), making sure you get at least eight hours of sleep, having regular medical checkups and managing existing conditions that can lead to heart disease."

Wilhelm said another area of nutrition for heart health is eating foods rich in heart-healthy omega-3 [fatty acids](#), which are found in fish and seafood as well as in many plant-based sources, such as nuts, seeds and vegetable oils.

"Overall, eating healthy, being physically active, limiting alcohol and avoiding smoking will all help promote wellness and heart health," she said.

Opportunities to learn more about healthy eating

In addition to Wilhelm's online course, AgriLife Extension has a number of resources on healthful foods and developing and maintaining a [healthy diet](#).

For more information, visit [AgriLife Learn](#) for related publications and

courses. Also, visit the [Dinner Tonight!](#) website for a variety of healthy recipes as well as tips and tricks on food preparation.

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