

# Food for a happy heart

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It's only about the size of your fist. Yet it pumps about 2,000 gallons of blood throughout your body every day. If you could stretch out the complex network of blood vessels in your body through which your heart pumps oxygen and nutrients, it would extend over 60,000 miles.

Pretty amazing, these hearts of ours. And pretty sad when they get sick. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

heart disease is the leading cause of death and disease for both men and women in the U.S. As of 2021 statistics, one in every five deaths each year was due to [heart disease](#).

Yet here's another amazing fact. An estimated 80% of heart attacks and strokes could have been prevented, according to the World Health Organization.

How to do that is nothing we haven't heard before. Eat a healthful diet. Get regular physical activity. (At least 30 minutes a day.) Don't use tobacco. (The risk for a heart attack or stroke begins to drop immediately after you stop using tobacco, says the WHO.)

So...what is a healthful diet? One proven to lower [blood pressure](#) and keep blood cholesterol in a normal range, says the American Heart Association. One such diet is the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) eating plan.

Spoiler alert: If you detest fruits and vegetables, get over it. Among other benefits, these foods are vital to blood pressure control. Most adults should aim for four to five servings (about 2 to 3 cups) of vegetables every day. Ditto for fruit.

Dairy foods (two to three daily servings of low fat milk, cheese or yogurt) are also part of the DASH plan, based on findings that the synergy between these and other foods are favorable for heart health.

Eat nuts, seeds and legumes four to five times a week. They provide heart-healthy fat and cholesterol-lowering dietary fiber.

DASH guidelines also recommend one or two fish meals a week along with a variety of other protein foods such as poultry, eggs and [lean meats](#)—emphasis on lean.

Modest (3 ounce) servings of lean meats are low in calories and saturated fat while providing protein (the heart is a muscle, remember) and other essential nutrients. And lest you think this limits your choices, there at least 29 cuts of meat that meet the United States Department of Agriculture's definition for lean, including sirloin, round, tenderloin and even tri-tip.

Healthy hearts also thrive on a fair share of (six to eight servings a day) of grains, whole grains when possible. Choose a variety of cereals, rice, pasta and breads for the most benefit.

Fats? Focus on vegetable-based oils and dressings in small amounts (1 to 2 tablespoons a day).

Even occasional sweets (no more than five servings a week) can fit into a heart healthy eating plan, according to DASH recommendations. Caution, though. A serving is just one tablespoon of jam, jelly or sugar.

Lastly, limit alcohol, as it can increase blood pressure when consumed in excess. Best to go by your doc's recommendations on this one.

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