



The Latest Research on Heart-Healthy Foods

Whole Plant Foods, Not Specific Nutrient Profiles, Best for Heart Disease Risk

Evidence is mounting that the healthiest diets are built around a variety of minimally processed, whole foods, and can't be reduced to specific nutrients. To determine saturated fat's role in heart disease risk, researchers from California reviewed the existing literature about saturated fats, polyunsaturated fats, carbohydrates, and heart disease. The scientists found that when saturated fat (found mostly in red meat and milk fat) is replaced with polyunsaturated fat (found mostly in nuts, seeds, and fish), heart disease risk decreases. However, when saturated fat is replaced with sugary refined carbohydrates, heart disease risk remains the same, if not worsens. The researchers also note a small, yet growing body of research that dairy fat (especially in fermented dairy, like yogurt), may be neutral (or even decrease risk) for heart disease. The researchers concluded that "overall dietary patterns emphasizing vegetables, fish, nuts, and whole versus processed grains form the basis of heart-healthy eating, and should supersede a focus on macronutrient composition."

[Annual Review of Nutrition](#). 2015 July 17;35:517-43. (Siri-Tarino PW et al.) [Epub]

Replace Butter with Fish, Nuts, Seeds, and Lower Risk of Heart Disease by 25%

Harvard researchers followed over 120,000 adults for 24-30 years, tracking their diet and health records. The scientists found that replacing 5% of daily calories from saturated fat with polyunsaturated fats (found in fish, nuts, seeds, and safflower oil), monounsaturated fats (found in olive oil and canola oil), or whole grains is linked with a 25%, 15%, and 9% lower risk of heart disease, respectively. Additionally, they found that replacing 5% of daily calories from refined grains and added sugars with whole grains or polyunsaturated fats can also significantly reduce heart disease risk, and that replacing saturated fat with refined grains or added sugars does not lower heart disease risk. The researchers concluded, "Our findings provide epidemiological evidence of the current dietary guidelines, which recommend both "replacing saturated fatty acids with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids" and "replacing refined grains with whole grains." The Mediterranean diet, which spotlights whole grains, fish, olive oil, nuts, and seeds, is the perfect eating plan to put these lessons into practice.

[Journal of the American College of Cardiology](#). 2015 Oct;66(14):1538-48. (Li Y et al.)

Mediterranean Meals with Olive Oil Can Improve Blood Sugar Control, Cholesterol

In a small Italian study, researchers assigned 25 healthy adults to a Mediterranean meal (pasta, chicken breast, salad, bread, and an apple) prepared either with or without olive oil, then measured their cholesterol and blood sugar. After 30 days, the participants switched groups and ate the other meal, serving as their own control. The scientists found that 2 hours after eating, the meal without olive oil was associated with higher glucose and insulin levels, as well as higher "bad cholesterol" (LDL-C). In the second part of the experiment, the participants were assigned to a Mediterranean meal prepared with either olive oil or corn oil, switching groups after a 30 day washout period. Their blood sugar and cholesterol was tested after the meals as well. Two hours after eating, the meals with olive oil were associated with a lower increase in blood sugar and improved markers of blood sugar control (such as lower DPP, and higher GLP1 & GIP), as well as a smaller increase in "bad cholesterol" (LDL-C and oxidized LDL). These experiments indicate that meals with olive oil can help regulate blood sugar, and may help improve cholesterol.

[Nutrition & Diabetes](#). 2015 July 20;5:e172. [Epub ahead of print.] (Violi F et al.)



Avocados Help Lower Cholesterol

Avocados are the perfect example of how delicious healthy eating can be! Researchers assigned 45 overweight and obese adults to one of three cholesterol lowering diets: a lower fat (24% calories from fat) diet, a moderate fat (34% calories from fat) diet with one avocado per day, and a moderate fat (34% calories from fat) diet with sunflower and canola oils. Those on the avocado diet lowered their “bad cholesterol” significantly more than those on the other diets. Additionally, the avocado group was the only group to significantly decrease LDL particle number (a risk factor for heart disease) and improve the ratio of LDL to HDL (the gap between “bad” and “good” cholesterol).

[*Journal of the American Heart Association*](#). 2015 Jan 7 (Wang L et al.).

Med Diet Cuts Heart Disease Risk by Nearly Half

Researchers have given us yet another reason to fill our plates with fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, olive oil, and nuts! A European study followed more than 2,500 Greek adults for over a decade, tracking their medical records, lifestyle habits, and eating patterns. Those who most closely followed the Mediterranean Diet were 47% less likely to get heart disease, regardless of their smoking habits, age, family history, or other lifestyle factors. The scientists estimate that every one-point increase on the Mediterranean Diet score (a measure of how closely participants followed the Mediterranean Diet, on a scale of 1 to 55) is associated with a 3 percent drop in heart disease risk, so every little bit counts. In fact, the researchers found that the Mediterranean Diet was even more protective against heart disease than physical activity!

[*Presentation at the American College of Cardiology's 64th Annual Scientific Session*](#). San Diego CA. March 15, 2015.

Cardioprotective Effect of Mediterranean Diet

Ventricular hypertrophy, or the thickening and enlargement of heart ventricles due to the accumulation of scar tissue, is thought to be a root cause of many heart ailments. To investigate how diet relates to this condition, researchers analyzed eating patterns and left ventricular mass (the size of the left ventricle of the heart, where enlargement is most common) of over 1,700 adults without history of heart attack or stroke. The scientists found that those most closely adhering to a Mediterranean Diet had a left ventricular mass that was 4% less than the rest of the study population, a reduction greater than that observed in people with moderate-to-heavy physical activity (another factor that supports heart health). In fact, for each point increase on the Mediterranean Diet Score (0-9), left ventricular mass was 1.98g lower (average left ventricular mass was 189g).

[*American Journal of Cardiology*](#). 2015 Feb 15;115(4):510-4. (Gardener H et al.)

Plant-based Diets Improve Heart Disease Markers in Overweight Kids

Plant-based diets have proven effective at reducing heart disease markers in adults, but with a large proportion of overweight and obese children, experts wonder if dietary interventions are effective on kids as well. In a small study in the Midwestern US, twenty-eight overweight and obese children (average age = 15) and their parents were assigned to either a plant-based vegan (no animal products at all), no-added fat diet (with only moderate avocado and nuts) or an American Heart Association diet (high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, but also includes low fat dairy, some plant oils, lean meat and fish, and permits some refined grains) for four weeks. The plant-based group significantly improved nine different risk factors of heart disease (including improved blood pressure, cholesterol, and weight), while the American Heart Association Diet significantly improved four risk factors.

[*The Journal of Pediatrics*](#). 2015 Feb 11. [Epub ahead of print] (Macknin M et al.)
