WellPATH
Your Path to Better Health
Joint Health Management Board

Monthly WellPATH Spotlight

February 2017: Heart Health

Although you might know eating certain foods can increase your heart disease risk, it's often tough to change your eating habits. Whether you have years of unhealthy eating under your belt or you simply want to fine-tune your diet, here are eight heart-healthy diet tips. Once you know which foods to eat more of and which foods to limit, you'll be on your way toward a heart-healthy diet.

HEART-HEALTHY DIET: 8 STEPS TO PREVENT HEART DISEASE

1. Limit unhealthy fats and cholesterol

Of the possible changes, limiting how much saturated and trans fats you eat is the most important step you can take to reduce your blood cholesterol and lower your risk of coronary artery disease. A high blood cholesterol level can lead to a buildup of plaques in your arteries, called atherosclerosis, which can increase your risk of heart attack and stroke.

The best way to reduce saturated and trans fats in your diet is to limit the amount of solid fats — butter, margarine and shortening — you add to food when cooking and serving. You can also reduce the amount of saturated fat in your diet by trimming fat off your meat or choosing lean meats with less than 10 percent fat.

You can also use low-fat substitutions when possible for a heart-healthy diet. For example, top your baked potato with salsa or low-fat yogurt rather than butter, or use low-sugar fruit spread on your toast instead of margarine.

You may also want to check the food labels of some cookies, crackers and chips. Many of these snacks — even those labeled "reduced fat" — may be made with oils containing trans fats. One clue that a food has some trans fat in it is the phrase "partially hydrogenated" in the ingredient list.

When you do use fats, choose monounsaturated fats, such as olive oil or canola oil. Polyunsaturated fats, found in nuts and seeds, also are good choices for a heart-healthy diet. When used in place of saturated fat, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats may help lower your total blood cholesterol. But moderation is essential. All types of fat are high in calories.

2. Choose low-fat protein sources

Lean meat, poultry and fish, low-fat dairy products, and egg whites or egg substitutes are some of your best sources of protein. But be careful to choose lower fat options, such as skim milk rather than whole milk and skinless chicken breasts rather than fried chicken patties.

Fish is another good alternative to high-fat meats. And certain types of fish are heart healthy because they're rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which can lower blood fats called triglycerides. You'll find the highest

amounts of omega-3 fatty acids in cold-water fish, such as salmon, mackerel and herring. Other sources are flaxseed, walnuts, soybeans and canola oil.

Legumes — beans, peas and lentils — also are good sources of protein and contain less fat and no cholesterol, making them good substitutes for meat. Substituting soy protein for animal protein — for example, a soy burger for a hamburger — will reduce your fat and cholesterol intake.

3. Eat more vegetables and fruits

Vegetables and fruits are good sources of vitamins and minerals; they are low in calories and rich in dietary fiber. Vegetables and fruits also contain substances found in plants that may help prevent cardiovascular disease. Eating more fruits and vegetables may help you eat less high-fat foods, such as meat, cheese and snack foods.

Featuring vegetables and fruits in your diet can be easy. Keep vegetables washed and cut in your refrigerator for quick snacks. Keep fruit in a bowl in your kitchen so that you'll remember to eat it. Choose recipes that have vegetables or fruits as the main ingredient, such as vegetable stir-fry or fresh fruit mixed into salads.

4. Select whole grains

Whole grains are good sources of fiber and other nutrients that play a role in regulating blood pressure and heart health. You can increase the amount of whole grains in a heart-healthy diet by making simple substitutions for refined grain products.

Another easy way to add whole grains to your diet is ground flaxseed. Flaxseeds are small brown seeds that are high in fiber and omega-3 fatty acids, which can lower your total blood cholesterol. You can grind the seeds in a coffee grinder or food processor and stir a teaspoon of them into yogurt, applesauce or hot cereal.

5. Reduce the salt in your food

Eating a lot of salt can contribute to high blood pressure, a risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Reducing the salt in your food is an important part of a heart-healthy diet. The American Heart Association recommends that healthy adults eat less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium a day (about a teaspoon).

Although reducing the amount of salt you add to food at the table or while cooking is a good first step, much of the salt you eat comes from canned or processed foods, such as soups and frozen dinners. Eating fresh foods and making your own soups and stews can reduce the amount of salt you eat. If you like the convenience of canned soups and prepared meals, look for ones with reduced sodium.

Another way to reduce the amount of salt you eat is to choose your condiments carefully. Many condiments are available in reduced-sodium versions, and salt substitutes can add flavor to your food with less sodium.

6. Control your portion size

In addition to knowing which foods to eat, you'll also need to know how much you should eat. Overloading your plate, taking seconds and eating until you feel stuffed can lead to eating more calories, fat and cholesterol than you should. Portions served in restaurants are often more than anyone needs. Keep track of the number of servings you eat — and use proper serving sizes — to help control your portions.

A serving size is a specific amount of food, defined by common measurements such as cups, ounces or pieces. For example, one serving of pasta is 1/2 cup, or about the size of a hockey puck. A serving of

meat, fish or chicken is 2 to 3 ounces, or about the size and thickness of a deck of cards. Judging serving size is a learned skill. You may need to use measuring cups and spoons or a scale until you're comfortable with your judgment.

7. Plan ahead: Create daily menus

You know what foods to feature in your heart-healthy diet and which ones to limit. Now it's time to put your plans into action.

Create daily menus using the six strategies listed above. When selecting foods for each meal and snack, emphasize vegetables, fruits and whole grains. Choose lean protein sources and limit high-fat and salty foods. Watch your portion sizes and add variety to your menu choices. For example, if you have grilled salmon one evening, try a black bean burger the next night. This helps ensure that you'll get all of the nutrients your body needs. Variety also makes your meals and snacks more interesting.

8. Allow yourself an occasional treat

Allow yourself an indulgence every now and then. A candy bar or handful of potato chips won't derail your heart-healthy diet. But don't let it turn into an excuse for giving up on your healthy-eating plan. If overindulgence is the exception, rather than the rule, you'll balance things out over the long term. What's important is that you eat healthy foods most of the time.

Incorporate these eight tips into your life, and you'll continue to find that heart-healthy eating is both doable and enjoyable. With planning and a few simple substitutions, you can eat with your heart in mind.

YOUR HEART! YOUR HEALTH!

The heart is one of the most important organs in the human body. It is composed of cardiac muscle and pumps blood throughout the body, beating approximately 72 times per minute. The heart pumps the blood that carries all the vital materials to our cells that help our body function, and removes the waste products that we no longer need. Every day, our heart beats (expands and contracts) 100,000 times, pumping 5,000 gallons of blood through the body. Although it's no bigger than a fist, the heart has the mighty job of keeping blood flowing through the 60,000 miles of blood vessels that feed our organs and tissues! Any damage to the heart or its valves can reduce that pumping power, forcing it to work harder just to keep up with the body's demand for blood.

A healthy cardiovascular system is essential. Still, heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the US, affecting both at nearly equal rates and claiming approximately 1 million lives each year. Heart disease includes all forms of coronary heart disease, narrowing or clogged arteries by cholesterol and fat deposits and plaque build-up (atherosclerosis) in the walls of the arteries, heart failure, irregular heart beat (arrhythmia) and heart valve disease.

Although certain risk factors such as age, gender (men are at higher risk) and family history are beyond our control, there are other risk factors that we can modify though habit and behavior. These include: high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, diabetes mellitus, poor diet and nutrition, obesity, lack of physical activity, stress, consuming excess alcohol and tobacco use.

The American Heart Association recommends these simple 7 steps to improve your risk:

1. Get Active
2. Eat Better
3. Lose Weight
4. Control Cholesterol
5. Manage Blood Pressure
6. Reduce Blood Sugar
7. Stop Smoking

Targeting these areas through lifestyle changes can help you prevent or control many heart disease risk factors which can, on average, help you live 10 years longer.