

You are what you eat.
Add these 5 "superfoods" to your diet for a healthy heart.

Q: Can you eat your way to a healthy heart?

A: You can certainly help your cause, say nutrition experts, by adding these five "superfoods" (or other members of their food group) to your diet on a regular basis. Here's a look at the five top choices that should be in your shopping cart.

Blueberries. This "powerhouse" tops the list, says Kathleen Zelman, MPH, RD/LD, WebMD's director of nutrition.

And Lisa Hark, PhD, RD, says, "Blueberries are not only delicious but are also rich in antioxidants." Hark is co-author, with Darwin Deen, MD, of *Nutrition for Life: The No-Nonsense, No-Fad Approach to Eating Well and Reaching Your Healthy Weight*.

According to the U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council, researchers believe that the antioxidants in blueberries work to reduce the buildup of "bad" LDL cholesterol in artery walls that contributes to cardiovascular disease and stroke. Studies conducted at the USDA Human Nutrition Center have found that blueberries rank No. 1 in antioxidant activity when compared with 40 other fresh fruits and vegetables. Antioxidants help neutralize harmful byproducts of metabolism called free radicals that can lead to cancer and other age-related diseases. Anthocyanin, the antioxidant that is thought to be responsible for this major health benefit, can also be found in blackberries, black raspberries, black currants, and red grapes.

Hark recommends a 1 cup serving of blueberries a day. Fresh, frozen, or dried, they can be added to cereal, muffins, or eaten by themselves.

Salmon. Zelman says she's a "huge salmon fan." "Salmon is widely available, affordable, fast, and easy." It's also one of the best sources of a "healthy fat" called omega-3 fatty acids.

Oily fish such as salmon (as well as mackerel, herring, and sardines) contain omega-3s, explains Hark. This fat is believed to reduce the risk of developing cardiovascular disease by lowering the levels of triglycerides in the body -- blood fats linked to heart disease and diabetes.

Research has also found that omega-3 fatty acids prevent blood clots by making platelets less likely to clump together and stick to artery walls, Hark adds.

"Blood vessels are also less likely to constrict, making the heart less vulnerable to life-threatening irregular heart rates," adds Deen.

The American Heart Association recommends eating at least two servings of fish (especially oily fish like salmon) at least twice a week; a serving is between 3 oz and 6 oz.

Soy Protein. Rich in omega-3 fatty acids, protein, vitamins, and minerals, soy protein is a good alternative for red meat, says Hobbs; it's also lower in fat and higher in fiber than many meat choices.

Studies have found that soy protein, when eaten with a healthy low-fat diet, lowers cholesterol. In fact, researchers in 2003 found that people who ate a diet of several cholesterol-fighting foods lowered their cholesterol as much as people who took medicine. The cholesterol-fighting diet included plant sterols in the form of a cholesterol-lowering margarine; soy proteins; sticky or soluble fibers such as fruits, vegetables, oats, and legumes; and almonds.

Both the FDA and the American Heart Association encourage eating at least 1 oz (28 grams) of soy protein daily. You can get your soy from soybeans, soy nuts, soy milk, soy flour, energy bars, fortified cereal, tempeh, and tofu.

Oatmeal. Grandma may have known what she was doing when she served up her piping hot bowl of oatmeal every morning, says Kim Seidl, MS, RD, LD, spokesperson for the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine. A half-cup daily serving of oatmeal contains only about 130 calories while delivering 5 grams of heart-healthy fiber that helps to lower cholesterol and keep body weight to a healthy level.

Another benefit of oatmeal is that it will fill you up and likely keep you filled until lunchtime, so you're not tempted by unhealthy snacks, says Peter Schulman, MD, a cardiologist at the University of Connecticut Health Center.

Oatmeal and other whole grains such as whole wheat, barley, rye, millet, quinoa, brown rice, and wild rice also help reduce the risk of diabetes, which in itself is a risk factor for heart disease, says Zelman.

It's important to use whole grains, not refined grains, says Zelman, "so you get the whole package." Refined or processed grains lose their nutrients and fiber.

You can get your whole grains in other forms besides oatmeal, Zelman adds, including whole grain breads and pastas.

The daily recommendation for fiber intake is between 21 and 38 grams, depending on your sex and age, according to the American Dietetic Association.

Spinach. This dark green, leafy vegetable (and its cousins such as kale, Swiss chard, broccoli, and collard greens) is high in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants that may protect against cardiovascular disease; it's also a source of omega-3 fatty acids, says Suzanne Havala Hobbs, DrPH, MS, RD, clinical assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Spinach is also rich in folate, says Hark, explaining that folate helps reduce the blood levels of the amino acid homocysteine. "An emerging risk factor for developing cardiovascular disease is a high level of homocysteine," says Hark, who recommends eating a cup a day of your favorite dark green, leafy vegetable.

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SOURCES: Kathleen Zelman, MPH, RD/LD, WebMD director of nutrition. Lisa Hark, PhD, RD, and Darwin Deen, MD, co-authors, Nutrition for Life. Suzanne Havala Hobbs, DrPH, MS, RD, clinical assistant professor, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Kim Seidl, MS, ED, LD, Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine. Peter Schulman, MD, University of Connecticut Health Center. U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council. American Heart Association. American Dietetic Association. The Journal of the American Medical Association, July 23/30, 2003