

Reversing Heart Disease Through Diet

Health and wellness tips from Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield

Most people with coronary heart disease have a checkered history with food. They've eaten a few too many pizzas and french fries, perhaps, and not quite enough fruits and vegetables. Maybe you can relate. But if your heart's in trouble, this is no time to regret your past indulgences. Instead, it's time to turn food into an ally. A healthy diet can go a long way toward preventing a heart attack – and it might even help clear your arteries. In fact, a new study suggests that a very low-fat diet may be as effective as statin drugs in reducing your cholesterol.

The Healthy Diet Basics

Diets are as individual as people. The foods you choose depend on your personal tastes and goals. But there's one rule that applies to everyone with coronary heart disease: You have to go easy on fats, especially saturated fats. Your body quickly turns saturated fat into LDL cholesterol, the "bad" cholesterol that clogs your arteries.

According to the American Heart Association (AHA), people with coronary heart disease should get less than 30 percent of their calories from fat and less than 7 percent from saturated fat. For a standard 2,000-calorie diet, that translates to less than 67 grams of fat and 16 grams of saturated fat. This guideline alone will go along way toward lowering your cholesterol and cutting your risk of a heart attack. Reading package labels on processed foods will tell you how many grams of saturated fat you'll get in one serving; animal products (including milk, cheese, and meat) are also high in saturated fat, as are scones, cookies, pizza, and other baked food rich in butter, cheese, or cream.

Saturated fat is often cast as the ultimate villain, but another type of fat can be even more dangerous to your heart. Trans unsaturated fats or trans fats – found in stick margarine, fried fast foods, and some cookies or other snack foods – increase LDL levels and lower your HDL, the "good" cholesterol that helps keep your arteries clear. A recent Harvard University study of more than 80,000 women suggested that replacing just 2 percent of trans fat calories with calories from healthier fats reduced the risk of heart disease by more than 50 percent. (Watch for "partially hydrogenated vegetable oil" on the product label – that's code for "trans fat." By January 2006, food manufacturers will be required to list trans fats on the nutrition content labels of all their products.)

"Healthier fats" may sound like a contradiction, but some types of fat really can help protect your heart. At the top of the list are monounsaturated fats found in olive oil, canola oil, and some nuts. These fats actually reduce your LDL cholesterol level and slow the progression of heart disease. Polyunsaturated fats – found in corn oil, soybean oil, and many margarines – also reduce LDL cholesterol, but they may worsen coronary heart disease by making the remaining cholesterol "stickier." Omega-3 fatty acids – found in fatty fish such as salmon and some fish oil or flaxseed supplements – may also lower your cholesterol and actually benefit your heart.

Of course, fats aren't the only part of your diet worth watching. If you already have heart problems, the AHA recommends getting less than 200 milligrams of cholesterol each day. As part of a low-cholesterol diet, you shouldn't eat more than two egg yolks per week and should get at least 55 percent of your calories from carbohydrates, especially complex carbohydrates. That translates to five to seven portions of fruits and vegetables and generous amounts of whole grains every day.

Putting more fruits and vegetables into your diet shouldn't be hard work. Most people can cut their consumption of saturated fat and trans fats in half by avoiding butter, margarine, fatty meats, and dairy products made from 2 percent or whole milk.

The Ornish and Mediterranean Diets

The AHA diet is practical and effective. But does it go far enough? A few recent studies have suggested that patients with heart disease may do even better on more highly specialized diets. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* on July 23, 2003 suggests that a vegetarian diet low in saturated fat could be as effective in lowering cholesterol as statin drugs. The University of Toronto study concluded that patients with high cholesterol would benefit greatly from consuming lots of plant fiber and little fat.

Two diets in particular have grabbed most of the headlines: the Mediterranean diet and the Ornish diet, a regimen developed by Dr. Dean Ornish. The first is just a slightly modified version of the AHA diet; the second takes a radical approach to the concept of "low fat." Each diet has its advantages, and each can help guide your own healthy choices.

Like the AHA diet, the Mediterranean diet provides up to 30 percent of calories from fat. However, most of those fats are heart-healthy monounsaturated fats from olive oil or canola-based margarines. The diet is also rich in legumes, foods such as peas and beans that lower LDL cholesterol while sparing the good HDL cholesterol.

The formula seems to work. A study of more than 400 heart attack survivors, published in the February 1999 issue of the journal *Circulation*, suggests that the Mediterranean diet may be a potent weapon against heart disease. Compared with patients on a standard low-fat diet, patients on the Mediterranean diet were about 70 percent less likely to have another heart attack or die of heart trouble over a span of five years. They were also about 70 percent less likely to suffer from chest pains (angina), stroke, heart failure, or blood clots in the lungs.

The Ornish diet takes the concept of "low-fat" to extremes. In this diet, the magic ratio for fat intake drops from less than 30 percent of all calories to less than 10 percent. Patients shun meat and all other animal products except egg whites and fat-free dairy items, and they avoid other fatty foods such as avocados, nuts, and seeds. (Some of his patients chose to take 3 to 4 grams of uncooked flax seed oil daily, which is rich in omega-3 fatty acids.) In addition to going low-fat, they get a scant 5 mg of cholesterol each day. To fill the void of fatty foods, they eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, and grains –

enough to have carbohydrates make up 75 percent of the daily calories. The Ornish program also calls for regular exercise and one hour each day of a stress management technique such as yoga or meditation.

For patients who can stick to it, the Ornish approach can offer great rewards. In a landmark study of 35 patients with coronary heart disease published in the December 16, 1998 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association, Ornish and his colleagues reported that the diet actually helped reverse the disease. After five years of the Ornish program, patients' arteries opened by an average of almost 10 percent. Among patients who followed a regular recovery plan, cholesterol buildup in the arteries got about 30 percent worse in those five years. Perhaps not surprisingly, the patients who didn't participate in the Ornish program were more than twice as likely to suffer a heart attack, enter a hospital for heart problems, or die of heart trouble.

The Real World

Results from the Mediterranean and Ornish diets have raised many questions, most of them still unanswered. To begin with, which parts of the diets are really protecting the heart? In the case of the Ornish program, could the exercise and stress management be even more beneficial than the fat reduction? Perhaps more important, how many people with coronary heart disease could ever hope to stick to either regimen?

If you can't imagine giving up meat or devoting yourself to beans and olive oil, don't despair. For any patient with coronary heart disease, the AHA diet – less than 30 percent of calories from fat, less than 7 percent from saturated fat – is an excellent place to start. From there, you can always decide to cut fat a bit further or use olive oil instead of butter. You may end up with a diet of your very own -- something you can really live with.

For more information on heart disease, visit the Heart Disease Center at Anthem.com. Click on MyHealth@Anthem at the member home page and then the link for Self-Care Centers.

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