



Healthy Heart Outlook

STAYING HEALTHY • LIVING WELL

FALL 2009

Chocolate: Take a Bite for Health?

Crave chocolate? It could be a healthy heart habit. Eating chocolate may lower blood pressure and improve blood flow.

Cocoa in chocolate is the real health superstar. Just like blueberries and red wine, cocoa beans contain antioxidants that can help fight heart disease.

Cocoa Power

The more natural cocoa in a product, the more antioxidants

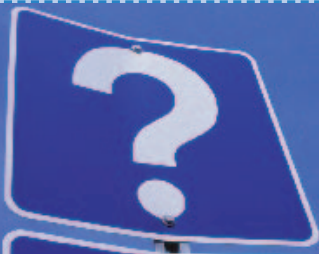
it has. But because processing can reduce cocoa's antioxidants, researchers often use special versions of cocoa and chocolate. So the exact benefits of commercially available chocolate is unknown.

But for mild high blood pressure, eating a very small amount of commercial dark chocolate daily may lower blood pressure. And eating cocoa has been linked to both lower blood

pressure and reduced risk for death from heart disease.

Darker Is Better

The sugar, fat, and milk often found in chocolate add calories and diminish cocoa's nutritional punch. So look for plain, dark chocolate with the most cocoa bean or cacao you can find—at least 40 to 60 percent. What's best? Cocoa and chocolate made from cocoa marked nonalkalized.



“Triple A”: Are You At Risk?

“Triple A,” or just AAA, is medical shorthand for abdominal aortic aneurysm. The aorta is the body’s largest blood vessel. With time, the aorta’s wall may develop a weak spot that stretches. This spot is an aneurysm, which can burst.

Most AAAs have no symptoms until they rupture, which can cause life-threatening bleeding. In fact, only about 20 percent of sufferers survive. So prevention and screening are important.

AAAs are a leading cause of death among those ages 55 and older. Men are four times more likely than women to develop one. AAAs can also run in families.

You can’t control your age, gender, or family history. But you can choose not to smoke. And you can control blood pressure and cholesterol levels through healthy eating and regular exercise. These steps can help protect you against AAAs.

Good Health Guidelines

For people with heart disease, it’s important to make sure the following tests are kept current and to discuss these topics with your health care provider:

- Having a lipid profile done at least once a year
- Having your blood pressure checked at every office visit
- Having a diabetes screening every three years if your blood glucose (sugar) reading is normal, or more frequently if it is above normal
- Reviewing your medications

Talk with your health care provider about ways to:

- Eat a healthy diet
- Manage your weight
- Get regular exercise
- Get help to quit smoking

A CLOSER LOOK

Review Your Medications with Your Provider

If you take more than one type of medication to treat heart disease, it’s a good idea to review your medications with your health care provider from time to time. This can help to prevent drug interactions and also help you find out whether you are taking the medications you need correctly. Make an appointment with your provider to talk about your medications. Bring all of your prescription medications and any over-the-counter drugs you use to the appointment. Ask questions about each medication so that you understand when to take them, how they work, and what side effects may occur. Talking about your medications can help you better manage heart disease.

Date of your next appointment:

Although these are suggested guidelines for care, please check with your benefits plan for coverage.

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Are Statins a Silver Bullet to Stop Heart Disease?



Recent headlines celebrated a breakthrough in the fight against heart disease: Cholesterol-lowering statin drugs have been found to significantly reduce the risk for heart-related events—like heart attack and stroke—in certain patients. While this is indeed great news, can a pill really protect you from heart disease, the number one killer of Americans?

Statins Can Do More Than Cut Cholesterol

In the statin study, participants did not have high levels of LDL, or “bad,” cholesterol. But they did have elevated levels of high-sensitivity C-reactive protein (CRP) in their blood. CRP is a lesser-known, but important, risk factor for heart disease.

Researchers gave half of the participants a daily dose of a cholesterol-lowering statin drug; the other half received a placebo. The results, reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, showed that the statin drug reduced the risk for heart attack, stroke, and death by nearly 50 percent in that group.

Another Bad Fat Is on the Rise

While these findings are encouraging, solving heart disease is not as simple as a pill. That’s because heart disease isn’t simple. It has a tangle of possible risk factors behind it, of which LDL cholesterol and CRP are only two. In fact, another blood fat plays a key role: triglycerides. And that’s where some sobering news comes in.

A recent study found that the percentage of adults with high triglyceride levels has doubled in the last 30 years. These adults are at risk for life-threatening events such as heart attack or stroke. One reason for this increase, researchers say, may be the dramatic rise in the number of obese Americans.

This new research helps confirm that weight loss, not a drug, is still the most effective way to keep your heart healthy. If you suspect you’re overweight, talk with your doctor. The best weight-loss measures for you depend on how overweight you are and any conditions you may have.

Take Control of CHD with Exercise

Living with heart disease may seem challenging at times. But you can change a lot of what puts you at risk for this condition. Staying active plays a key role in preventing, managing, and even improving coronary heart disease (CHD).



CHD occurs when the blood vessels that supply the heart with blood and oxygen become narrowed. Atherosclerosis, which develops when a fatty material called plaque clogs up the arteries, is usually the cause of CHD.

Plaque is made up of fat, cholesterol, calcium, and other substances found in the blood. When it narrows the arteries, you're more at risk for blood clots that can partially or completely stop blood flow to the heart.

Reduced blood flow to the heart can cause chest pain or discomfort called angina. Pain can also occur in the shoulders, arms, neck, jaw, or back. Activity and stress may cause the pain to worsen. And when the blood flow is completely blocked, a heart attack can happen.

Who's At Risk?

Certain traits, conditions, and habits raise

your chance of developing or worsening CHD. Risk factors you can control include:

- Unhealthy blood cholesterol levels
- High blood pressure
- Smoking
- Diabetes or pre-diabetes
- Being overweight or obese
- Lack of physical activity

Get Moving to Manage CHD

Exercise can help protect you against CHD, slow its progression, and reverse risk factors. It can also help manage your cholesterol and blood pressure levels; aid in weight loss and maintenance; and lessen the risk of pre-diabetes. Exercise can improve atherosclerosis and increase blood flow in the arteries. Plus, it reduces stress.

Ask your doctor about what kinds of exercise are safe for you. Unless told otherwise, get at

least 30 minutes of moderate activity on most days. You can exercise all at once or for shorter periods of at least 10 minutes. Types of moderate activity include:

- Walking
- Dancing
- Swimming
- Bicycling
- Gardening
- Weight lifting

Even people who've had a heart attack benefit from exercise. Studies show that those who exercise and make other healthy changes after a heart attack live longer and have a better quality of life.

But you have to stick with it. A study reported in the American Heart Association's journal *Circulation* found that while all types of exercise can help improve blood flow after a heart attack, the benefit vanishes just four weeks after the exercise is stopped.

Cardiac Rehab Pays Off

Many patients with CHD or who've experienced other heart problems attend cardiac rehabilitation programs. These programs, supervised by a team of medical professionals, include:

- Exercise training
- Education on heart-healthy living
- Counseling to reduce stress
- Support and training to help people return to an active life

If you need help with exercise, check to see if your benefits cover a cardiac rehab program. Hospitals frequently offer the programs, which are sometimes available at local senior or civic centers.

Tame Your Resting Heart Rate

A higher resting heart rate (HR) can spell trouble, especially for those with heart disease. Research shows it may be a red flag for more serious heart trouble. Plus, elevated HR may cause heart disease, which can lead to heart attack.

Your Arteries and Heart Attack Risk

The heart normally beats about 60 to 80 times a minute when you're at rest. Resting HR tends to be lower in people who exercise and often rises with age. Heart disease is also linked to higher HR.

When the heart beats faster, it has less time to fill with blood between beats and works harder. This puts extra pressure on the arteries, which can lead to the damage that causes atherosclerosis—in which arteries leading to the heart have become clogged. In fact, studies show that higher HR may indicate atherosclerosis.

Elevated HR might also predict heart attack risk. Women with an HR higher than 76 beats a minute may be more likely to have a heart attack than those with an HR of 76 beats per minute or less. A higher HR may also signal heart attack risk in men.

Help Your Heart

Try these tips to help lower HR and improve heart function:

- Get regular aerobic exercise like brisk walking, swimming, jogging, or biking.
- Try relaxation techniques, yoga, or meditation.
- Practice slow, deep breathing.





Angina. Chest pain or discomfort caused by reduced blood flow to the heart. Coronary heart disease can cause angina.

Antioxidants. Substances that may shield your body's cells from free radicals. Free radicals may contribute to diseases like heart disease. Foods packed with antioxidants include many fruits and vegetables, and even some chocolate.

Magnesium. A mineral that can be found in bones, cells, and blood. It supports many of the body's functions, such as maintaining strong bones and a steady heart rhythm. It's found in green veggies, whole grains, and beans.

Nonalkalized chocolate. Chocolate that hasn't been through a type of processing, called alkalization or "Dutch" processing, that can severely reduce the antioxidant content.

Potassium. An element that assists in cell, nerve, and muscle function. It can also help lower blood pressure. Bananas, tomato juice, potatoes, and other foods have potassium.

Dress for Success

It might not be a question you usually ask when selecting your outfit: Which clothing is best for your heart?



But maybe it should be. With heart failure, the heart is working harder to pump blood. Looser clothes allow blood to flow more freely. Tight socks or stockings can slow blood flow to the legs, increasing your risk for blood clots.

Your heart also has to work harder to keep your temperature constant. Smart choices in extreme weather reduce the strain and keep you healthier.

Keep Out the Cold

People with heart disease are at higher risk for hypothermia, a dangerous drop in body temperature. It can make symptoms worse and may even be fatal.

When it's freezing outside, stay warm and dry indoors. If you must go out, try the following apparel tips:

- **Think layers.** Trapped air between loose-fitting items insulates you. Choose wool or silk for inner layers and a weather-resistant outer shell.
- **Cover your head.** Body

heat can escape through your scalp. Hats and scarves are winter must-haves.

- **Wear heavy socks and mittens.** Hands and feet are prone to frostbite.
- **Snowbirds beware.** Cold weather is hardest on your heart if you're used to warm climates. Take precautions during unusual cold snaps.

Stay Cool in the Heat

If you live in a warm climate or are traveling to a warm destination, hot weather can hit hard. Keep cool with these tactics:

- **Put on as little clothing as possible when you're not in the sun.** What you do wear should be light-colored, lightweight, and loose.
- **Make sunscreen a part of your outfit.** Sunburn makes it harder to keep your body cool. Choose an SPF of 15 or higher.
- **Wear a wide-brimmed hat.** It will keep you cooler and protect you from sunburn.

Diet and Blood Pressure — The Rest of the Story

We all know cutting back on salt is good for blood pressure. But making sure you have the right amounts of potassium, calcium, and magnesium may be just as important in lowering blood pressure and improving heart health.

These nutrients play an important role in both preventing and managing high blood pressure. But Americans eat about half the potassium recommended. And unless you are eating lots of fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products, you are probably not getting enough magnesium and calcium either.

The Power of Potassium

Put potassium at the top of the list of heart protectors. Experts recommend getting 4,700 mg a day to lower blood pressure.

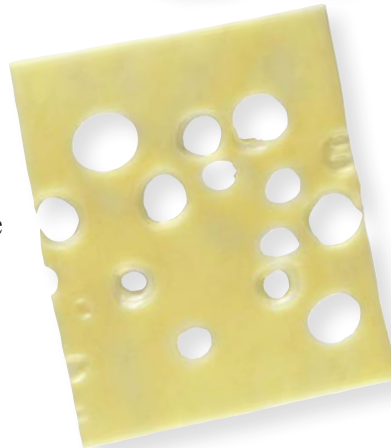
Luckily, you can find potassium in a lot of foods. Some of the best sources include avocados, bananas, mushrooms, peanuts, potatoes, winter squash, and dried apricots.

Minerals Matter

Magnesium also helps support normal blood pressure. It's recommended that men get 400 to 420 mg daily and women get 310 to 320 mg. Good sources include green vegetables like spinach, oatmeal, nuts, beans, and low-fat dairy products.

Calcium from food—not supplements—seems to help lower blood pressure. Adults ages 50 and younger need 1,000 mg a day, while those older than age 50 should strive for 1,200 mg daily. Low-fat dairy products and vegetables like kale and broccoli are good sources. Other good choices include tofu and fruit juice and cereals fortified with calcium.

Some medications can raise your potassium levels. Talk with your doctor before making changes to your diet. If you have kidney problems, discuss the right amount of potassium and magnesium intake for you.



Potatoes and Leeks with Chicken

Serves 8

Ingredients

- 2 tbsp. olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tbsp. chopped fresh ginger root
- 2 tsp. curry powder or to taste
- ½ tsp. crushed, dried chilies
- ¼ tsp. allspice
- ¼ tsp. cinnamon
- 3 leeks, trimmed and chopped
- 3 potatoes, peeled and cut in 1-inch chunks
- 1 cup low-sodium tomato sauce
- 2 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 3 cups butternut squash, peeled and cubed
- 2 red peppers, diced
- 4 chicken breasts, boned
- Cilantro to taste

Directions

Heat oil in large saucepan. Add garlic, ginger, spices, and leeks. Cook a few minutes until tender. Add potatoes, tomato sauce, and chicken broth. Cook 10 minutes. Add squash and peppers; cook 15 minutes or until vegetables are tender. Lightly brush chicken breasts with oil. Grill approximately 10 minutes on each side, or until juices run clear. Cut each chicken breast into 3 or 4 large pieces and add to sauce. Sprinkle with cilantro.

Per Serving

Calories 250, Total fat 5 g (Saturated fat 1 g), Cholesterol 35 mg, Sodium 75 mg, Total carbohydrate 36 g, Dietary fiber 6 g, Protein 19 g

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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