



Food as Health for Heart Disease

Lauren Batey, MS, RD

Program Coordinator II

Heather Norman-Burgdolf, PhD

Assistant Extension Professor

It's likely you or someone you know is living with cardiovascular disease in some form. It is also a condition you often hear about on the news and in the media. Cardiovascular disease refers to all problems related to the heart and blood vessels. It is the leading cause of death in Kentucky. Heart disease is one of the most common types of cardiovascular disease. Heart disease is often the result of the buildup of a substance called plaque in the blood vessels and arteries. Plaque can cause the arteries to become narrow or blocked which can lead to a heart attack or stroke.

Several factors contribute to heart disease. Some risk factors for heart disease are outside of your control. Factors such as age or genetics like your family history may increase your risk of developing heart disease. However, many of the factors that lead to heart disease are things that can be changed. This means you can manage your heart health by making small lifestyle changes like focusing on nutritious foods in your diet.

To understand how food can impact heart disease, you must first learn about cholesterol and



triglycerides. Understanding what these words mean will help you when you have conversations with your health-care provider about heart health.



HDL cholesterol is considered the “good” type of cholesterol. HDL works like a scavenger by flowing in your blood to pull excess LDL cholesterol off the inner walls of your blood vessels.

What are the roles of cholesterol and triglycerides in heart disease?

Cholesterol is a fat-like substance that your body needs in appropriate amounts. Your body can make cholesterol and it is also in some foods you eat. The two most talked about forms of cholesterol are LDL and HDL.

LDL cholesterol is often called the “bad” type of cholesterol by most people. When LDL levels in the blood are too high for too long, it begins to stick to the inside of your blood vessels and leads to inflammation. Over time, the blood vessels may become blocked, and blood can no longer flow

through. High LDL cholesterol could be a part of your family history.

HDL cholesterol is considered the “good” type of cholesterol. HDL works like a scavenger by flowing in your blood to pull excess LDL cholesterol off the inner walls of your blood vessels. This keeps blood flowing and your blood vessels healthy.

Triglycerides are fats that travel through your bloodstream. This type of fat comes from the foods you eat and can be made in the liver. High blood triglycerides can lead to the blood vessels becoming hard and thick. This affects how well blood can flow throughout the body. While several factors can lower blood triglyceride levels, one of the best ways is to focus on whole fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in the diet.

What food choices can you make to protect your heart?

Eating foods high in saturated fat can lead to high LDL cholesterol. Rather than focusing on choosing foods low in cholesterol, it is more helpful to choose foods low in saturated fat to improve cholesterol levels. To help identify saturated fats, keep in mind they are usually solid at room temperature. Examples of foods high in saturated fat are:

- Butter and lard
- Fried food
- Meats like beef, lamb, pork, or processed meats
- Packaged cookies, pastries, and desserts
- Fast food

Other types of fats have been shown to benefit the body and decrease the risk of heart disease. These are called unsaturated fats. They are liquid at room temperature. One way to increase heart-healthy HDL is to choose foods rich in unsaturated fats often. Examples of foods with unsaturated fats are:

- Nuts
- Seeds
- Fish
- Avocados
- Oils from plants like vegetable oil, olive oil, and canola oil

Picture your blood vessels as a straw. Imagine trying to push saturated fat through your blood vessels. What happens? It gets clogged because it's solid at room temperature and blood can't flow through. Imagine trying to pour unsaturated fats through your straw. They flow right through. This provides a visual reminder why unsaturated fats are your heart-healthy choice.

Another way to protect the heart and blood vessels is to choose foods high in soluble fiber each day. Soluble fiber becomes a gel as it digests. As it moves

Try baking, roasting, or air frying instead of frying in oil.



through the gut, this gel can prevent the buildup of fat and LDL cholesterol in the blood vessels. As it digests, soluble fiber can help carry cholesterol out of the body as waste. Great options for foods high in soluble fiber include:

- Whole grains
- Oats
- Whole fruits and vegetables
- Beans and legumes

What are some ways you can begin a heart healthy diet?

Making small changes in your diet over time can go a long way toward protecting your heart and preventing heart disease. Here are just a few tips for getting started:

- Try baking, roasting, or air frying instead of frying in oil.
- Prioritize fiber in meals and snacks by adding in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.

- Choose fast food two times or less each week.
- Choose lean protein like chicken, turkey, or fish, more often.
- Incorporate beans into your meals a few times per week.
- Fill half of your plate with high fiber vegetables like broccoli, carrots, green beans, greens, zucchini, or squash.

The American Heart Association has a program to help people easily identify heart healthy foods at the grocery store. Look for products labeled with the official symbol of the *Heart-Check Food Certification Program*.



These foods are certified as options low in sodium and saturated fat and high in beneficial nutrients including vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, calcium, protein, or dietary fiber.

Managing and improving heart health is possible. With practice, small choices based on the list below can lead to improved heart health over time.

1. Focus on unsaturated fat.
2. Eat a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables.
3. Prioritize whole foods.
4. Incorporate fiber-rich foods like beans and legumes.

Rather than focusing on what you can't eat, consider this an opportunity to add flavorful and nutritious foods to your diet to lower your risk of heart disease.

References

- <https://www.eatright.org/health/health-conditions/cardiovascular-health-heart-disease-hypertension>
- <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/consumer-healthcare/what-is-cardiovascular-disease>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease>
- https://www.cdc.gov/cholesterol/ldl_hdl.htm
- <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/FactSheetKnowDiffDesign2020V4a.pdf>

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, physical or mental disability or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity. Reasonable accommodation of disability may be available with prior notice. Program information may be made available in languages other than English. University of Kentucky, Kentucky State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Kentucky Counties, Cooperating.