

25 Top Heart-Healthy Foods

These 25 foods are loaded with heart-healthy nutrients that help protect your cardiovascular system.

By Jeanie Lerche Davis

From asparagus to sweet potatoes to a robust cabernet -- every bite (or sip) of heart-healthy foods delivers a powerful dose of phytonutrients that prevent and repair damage to cells. That's the essence of preventing heart disease.

"There really is an abundance of fruits and vegetables in many colors, shapes, sizes that are good for your heart," says Julia Zumpano, RD, LD, a dietitian with the Preventive Cardiology Center at The Cleveland Clinic. "You can definitely reduce your risk of developing cardiovascular disease by eating these foods every day."

Indeed, fresh produce provide the cornerstone for a heart-healthy diet because they help wipe out free radicals in the bloodstream, protecting blood vessels.

It's what Zumpano calls "the whole-foods diet. You want everything to be in its natural form, as it comes from the ground, the less processed the better," she says.

Whole grains, beans and legumes, nuts, fatty fish, and teas are just as important -- offering all sorts of complex heart-protective phytonutrients.

That's why variety is best in selecting heart-healthy foods, says Suzanne Farrell, MS, RD, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association and owner of Cherry Creek Nutrition in Denver.

"Everyone's looking for that one magic food," Farrell tells WebMD. "But heart-healthy is not only about oatmeal and omega-3 fats. You need to look for ways to get all the different nutrients. Plus, you'll stick to a heart-healthy lifestyle longer if you have variety."

With the help of these nutrition experts from The Cleveland Clinic and the American Dietetic Association, we've put together a list of the "best of the best" heart-healthy foods.

The foods listed here are all top-performers in protecting your heart and blood vessels. We've also got menu ideas -- so you can easily bring heart-healthy foods into your daily breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

1. **Salmon**

Omega-3 fatty acids.

Grill salmon with a yummy rub or marinade. Save a chunk to chop for a pasta or salad later on.

2. **Flaxseed (ground)**

Omega-3 fatty acids; fiber, phytoestrogens.

Ground flaxseed hides easily in all sorts of foods -- yogurt parfaits, morning cereal, homemade muffins, or cookies.

3. **Oatmeal**

Omega-3 fatty acids; magnesium; potassium; folate; niacin; calcium; soluble fiber.

Top hot oatmeal with fresh berries. Oatmeal-and-raisin cookies are a hearty treat.

4. **Black or Kidney Beans**

B-complex vitamins; niacin; folate; magnesium; omega-3 fatty acids; calcium; soluble fiber.

Give soup or salad a nutrient boost -- stir in some beans.

5. Almonds

Plant omega-3 fatty acids; vitamin E; magnesium; fiber; heart-favorable mono- and polyunsaturated fats; phytosterols.

Mix a few almonds (and berries) into low-fat yogurt, trail mix, or fruit salads.

6. Walnuts

Plant omega-3 fatty acids; vitamin E; magnesium; folate; fiber; heart-favorable mono- and polyunsaturated fats; phytosterols.

Walnuts add flavorful crunch to salads, pastas, cookies, muffins, even pancakes.

7. Red wine

Catechins and resveratrol (flavonoids).

Toast your good health! A glass of red wine could improve "good" HDL cholesterol.

8. Tuna

Omega-3 fatty acids; folate; niacin.

Here's lunch: Salad greens, fresh fruit, canned tuna. Keep "Salad Spritzer" - a light dressing -- in your office fridge.

9. Tofu

Niacin; folate; calcium; magnesium; potassium.

Tasty tofu is easy: Thinly slice "firm" tofu, marinate several hours, grill or stir-fry.

10. Brown rice

B-complex vitamins; fiber; niacin; magnesium, fiber.

Microwavable brown rice makes a quick lunch. Stir in a few chopped veggies (broccoli, carrots, spinach).

11. Soy milk

Isoflavones (a flavonoid); B-complex vitamins; niacin; folate, calcium; magnesium; potassium; phytoestrogens.

Soy milk is great over oatmeal or whole-grain cereal. Or, make a smoothie with soy milk.

12. Blueberries

Beta-carotene and lutein (carotenoids); anthocyanin (a flavonoid); ellagic acid (a polyphenol); vitamin C; folate; calcium, magnesium; potassium; fiber.

Cranberries, strawberries, raspberries are potent, too -- for trail mixes, muffins, salads!

13. Carrots

Alpha-carotene (a carotenoid); fiber.

Baby carrots are sweet for lunch. Sneak shredded carrots into spaghetti sauce or muffin batter.

14. Spinach

Lutein (a carotenoid); B-complex vitamins; folate; magnesium; potassium; calcium; fiber.

Pick spinach (not lettuce) for nutrient-packed salads and sandwiches.

15. Broccoli

Beta-carotene (a carotenoid); Vitamins C and E; potassium; folate; calcium; fiber.

Chop fresh broccoli into store-bought soup. For a veggie dip, try hummus (chickpeas).

16. Sweet potato

Beta-carotene (a carotenoid); vitamins A, C, E; fiber.

Microwave in a zip-lock baggie for lunch. Eat *au naturale*, or with pineapple bits.

17. Red bell peppers

Beta-carotene and lutein (carotenoids); B-complex vitamins; folate; potassium; fiber.

Rub with olive oil, and grill or oven-roast until tender. Delicious in wraps, salads, sandwiches.

18. Asparagus

Beta-carotene and lutein (carotenoids); B-complex vitamins; folate; fiber.

Grill or steam slightly, then dress with olive oil and lemon. It's a pretty side dish.

19. Oranges

Beta-cryptoxanthin, beta- and alpha-carotene, lutein (carotenoids) and flavones (flavonoids); vitamin C; potassium; folate; fiber.

Got orange juice? Check out the new nutrient-packed blends.

20. Tomatoes

Beta- and alpha-carotene, lycopene, lutein (carotenoids); vitamin C; potassium; folate; fiber.

For a flavor twist, try oil-packed tomatoes in sandwiches, salads, pastas, pizzas.

21. Acorn squash

Beta-carotene and lutein (carotenoids); B-complex and C vitamins; folate; calcium; magnesium; potassium; fiber.

Baked squash is comfort food on a chilly day. Serve with sautéed spinach, pine nuts, raisins.

22. Cantaloupe

Alpha- and beta-carotene and lutein (carotenoids); B-complex and C vitamins; folate; potassium; fiber.

A fragrant ripe cantaloupe is perfect for breakfast, lunch, potluck dinners. Simply cut and enjoy!

23. Papaya

Beta-carotene, beta-cryptoxanthin, lutein (carotenoids); Vitamins C and E; folate; calcium; magnesium; potassium.

Serve papaya salsa with salmon: Mix papaya, pineapple, scallions, garlic, fresh lime juice, salt and black pepper.

24. Dark chocolate

Resveratrol and cocoa phenols (flavonoids).

A truffle a day lowers blood pressure, but choose 70% or higher cocoa content.

25. Tea

Catechins and flavonols (flavonoids).

Make sun tea: Combine a clear glass jar, several tea bags, and hours of sunshine.

What does it all mean?

Phytoestrogens are substances in plants (like flaxseed) that have a weak estrogen-like action in the body. Studies suggest that flaxseed lowers the risk of blood clots, stroke, and cardiac arrhythmias. It may also help lower total and LDL "bad" cholesterol and triglycerides, and even blood pressure.

Phytosterols are plant sterols that chemically resemble cholesterol -- and seem to reduce blood cholesterol. All nuts and seeds, including wheat germ, have phytosterols.

Carotenoids are heart-protective antioxidants in many colorful fruits and veggies. Alpha-carotene, beta-carotene, lutein, and lycopene are carotenoids.

Polyphenols are another set of antioxidants that protect blood vessels, lower blood pressure, reduce LDL "bad" cholesterol. **Flavonoid** polyphenols include catechins, flavonones, flavonols, isoflavones, resveratrol, and anthocyanins.

Non-flavonoid polyphenols include ellagic acid (found in all types of berries).

Omega-3 fatty acids (found in fatty fish like salmon) and **alpha-linolenic fatty acids** (found in plant foods like walnuts) help boost the immune system, reduce blood clots, and protect against heart attacks. They also increase good HDL levels, lower triglyceride levels, protect arteries from plaque buildup, are anti-inflammatories, and lower blood pressure.

B-complex vitamins -- like **Vitamin B-12 (folate)** and **vitamin B-6** -- protect against blood clots and atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries. **Niacin (vitamin B-3)** helps increase HDL "good" cholesterol.

Vitamins C and E are antioxidants that protect cells from free radical damage. **Magnesium, potassium, and calcium** help lower blood pressure. **Fiber**-rich foods help lower cholesterol levels.ⁱ

ⁱ SOURCES: Julia Zumpano, RD, LD, dietitian, Preventive Cardiology Center at The Cleveland Clinic. Suzanne Farrell, MS, RD, spokeswoman, American Dietetic Association; owner, Cherry Creek Nutrition, Denver. USDA National Nutrient Database. Cleveland Clinic Heart & Vascular Institute: "35 Power Foods" and "The Power of Fish: Omega-3 Fatty Acids." USDA: "Frequently Asked Questions About Phytonutrients." WebMD Weight Loss Clinic Feature: "5 Surprisingly Healthy Foods," "'Survivor' Foods: 10 Foods to Take to a Desert Island." WebMD Features: "Wining and Dining the Heart," "Proper Nutrition and Heart Health," "7 Nutrients Your Diet May Be Missing," "Sneak 'Superfoods' Into Your Diet." WebMD Medical News: "Dark Chocolate is Healthy Chocolate." WebMD Weight Loss Clinic Feature: "Easy Add-Ins to Boost Nutrition."