

So What is a Heart-Healthy Diet?

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As a practicing cardiologist I am frequently asked, "What kind of diet should I be eating to prevent a heart attack?" Many studies done since the 1950's have established a strong relationship between diet, increased cholesterol levels and heart attacks. Unfortunately, we are bombarded by confusing and often conflicting information about diet from various sources such as the media or the Internet. Diets such as the Atkins Diet, Zone Diet and Sugar Busters Diet promise weight loss but do not necessarily equal a "heart-healthy diet."

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans was updated and published by the US Departments of Agriculture and Health & Human Services this year and provides a good starting point from which most people will benefit. The key recommendations of these guidelines are to maintain a healthy body weight, take in fewer calories, make wise food choices and be more physically active. (<http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines/>)

Obesity is a national epidemic and increases the risk of many medical problems including diabetes, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease (heart attack and stroke). The basic cause of this obesity epidemic is that more calories are being taken in as food than are expended by physical activity. Unfortunately, human beings evolved as hunter-gatherers and are genetically programmed to take in large amounts of calorie-dense food and to conserve energy whenever possible. In modern society however, where food is readily available and most people work in sedentary jobs, these instincts work against us and helps promote weight gain.

Making wise food choices should become second nature. The updated dietary guidelines recommend 5-9 servings of fruits and vegetables a day, increased intake of whole grains instead of refined grains (white bread/wheat bread), nonfat dairy products and lean meats. Most fats should come in the form of monounsaturated or polyunsaturated fats (fish, nuts, vegetable oils such as canola oil or olive oil). Saturated fats and trans fats should be avoided. Cut back on or avoid "empty calories" from junk food.

A diet such as this would be consistent with what is termed a Mediterranean diet. Studies have shown that a Mediterranean type diet can lower risk of heart attacks.

Very low fat diets (< 15% of calories from fat), as promoted by Dr. Dean Ornish, have been shown to halt or slow progression of coronary artery disease but it is very hard for most people to adhere to the diet long term. Of the popular or fad diets, I believe the South Beach Diet most closely approximates what can be considered a Mediterranean diet-but many variations of this type of diet exist. Studies of cardiovascular outcomes of patients on the South Beach diet are ongoing.

Consumers must be aware of serving size and the number of servings per package. There has been a steady increase in serving size ('supersizing') over the past 2 decades leading to increased caloric intake. Most Americans gain almost 2 pounds per year. This could be avoided by consuming 100-200 fewer calories a day or by burning that many more calories a day. Understand that it is hard to just "walk the weight off." To burn 250 calories (a candy bar or can of regular soda) an average-sized person would have to walk briskly for 1 hour. Guidelines now recommend 30 minutes of moderate exercise, most days of the week, and 60 - 90 minutes a day to manage/lose weight.

By making better food choices and increasing physical activity, weight can be managed and risk for cardiovascular disease can be significantly lowered. For more information on cardiovascular health and diet visit the websites www.americanheart.org and/or www.heartcenteroftherockies.com.