

Top Heart Health Tips

Keep your ticker in shape with protective foods that will also boost running.

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Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women—and your runner lifestyle doesn't necessarily make you immune. In fact, 25 percent of heart attacks happen in people who don't smoke and who have healthy cholesterol levels. The good news: Exercise decreases your risk, as can eating a diet rich in heart-healthy foods, such as those in the Mediterranean diet. These foods supply nutrients and antioxidants that work together, creating a synergy that protects your heart. The key is to incorporate all these foods—not just one or two—into your diet to get the most benefit. As a bonus, you'll also get plenty of quality carbs, protein, and nutrients for top running performance.

Berries, Mango, Citrus

Research shows fruit-eaters have a lower risk for heart disease; load up on a variety for heart-protecting nutrients, such as anthocyanins (in berries), carotenes (in mango), and vitamin C (in citrus).

Heart smart: Aim for three different types of fruits daily.

Dark Chocolate

If you're overweight, exercise can dangerously raise blood pressure—but cocoa flavanols may help. In one study, overweight subjects drank a high- or low-flavanol cocoa drink, then cycled. The high-flavanol group had more improved bloodflow and lower blood pressure mid- and post-exercise than the other group.

Heart smart: An ounce and a half of dark chocolate a day may provide heart benefits.

Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

Its potent antioxidants combat inflammation and prevent LDL (the "bad" cholesterol) from damaging arteries.

Heart smart: Use it to saute veggies but avoid frying; high temperatures damage its health-boosting compounds.

Greens, Onions, Beets

Greens contain folate; onions supply quercetin. These compounds protect blood vessels. Beets offer nitrates, which help control blood pressure.

Heart smart: Eat at least three servings daily from a variety of colorful vegetables.

Kamut

In one study, eating whole-grain kamut for eight weeks led to a drop in subjects' total and LDL cholesterol, compared with a semi-whole-grain diet. Whole grains are rich in heart-protecting antioxidants.

Heart smart: Select whole grains as often as possible.

Salmon

Fatty fish like salmon and other seafood (such as tuna and clams) supply omega-3 fatty acids. These essential fats help lower circulating levels of dangerous fats called triglycerides. They also fight inflammation, which damages blood vessels and sets the stage for heart disease.

Heart smart: Eat two four-ounce servings of salmon or other fatty fish weekly.

Walnuts

New research shows that walnuts contain protective antioxidant phenols that can markedly improve blood-vessel function just hours after eating a few ounces. Other nuts, such as almonds, are also heart-healthy.

Heart smart: Have one ounce of walnuts (14 walnut halves) or other nuts each day.

Yogurt and Cheese

A recent Australian study found that eating full-fat cultured yogurt and cheese for three weeks can lower inflammatory markers linked to heart disease, compared with eating low-fat, noncultured dairy. The combination of calcium and probiotics in cultured dairy may help regulate blood pressure and mitigate other heart-disease risk factors.

Heart smart: Eat a serving or two of yogurt (a serving is one cup) or cheese (one and a half ounces) daily.