

KEEPING A HEALTHY HEART

Heart disease is the number one health problem in the United States, accounting for more than a million heart attacks and a half million deaths every year.¹ Because we now know what causes heart attacks, we can prevent them. Studies show that people who have heart attacks often have high cholesterol levels; many also smoke or have high blood pressure. When these causes are controlled, heart attacks become rare.

Cholesterol and Your Heart

In many studies, researchers have found that higher levels of cholesterol are linked to a greater risk of having a heart attack. For every 1 percent increase in the amount of cholesterol in your blood, there is a 2 percent increase in your risk of having a heart attack; conversely, every 1 percent reduction in your cholesterol level reduces your risk by 2 percent.²

Elevated cholesterol—anything above 150—promotes atherosclerosis, the buildup of cholesterol, fat, and cells in the arteries that feed the heart muscle.³ When these arteries become clogged, a section of this muscle loses its blood supply. The result is a heart attack.

Fortunately, this process can be reversed without drugs and their side effects. Dr. Dean Ornish demonstrated this fact in his landmark study of patients with advanced heart disease. Dr. Ornish put a group of patients on a completely vegetarian diet, which was less than 10 percent fat. They were also asked to begin a moderate exercise program, walking a half hour every day, and were taught relaxation techniques. Patients in this group found that their chest pain disappeared and their cholesterol levels dropped at a rate comparable to that of cholesterol-lowering drugs, without the side effects. Because the patients felt so much better, they were motivated to stick with this program. The plaques that had been growing in their hearts for decades actually started to dissolve within one year.⁴

According to Ornish and other heart researchers, a vegan (pure vegetarian) diet is the best for lowering cholesterol

levels. Plant foods contain no cholesterol, whereas meats, eggs, and dairy products contain large amounts of cholesterol, saturated fats, and concentrated protein, all harmful substances. Also, the high fiber content of a vegetarian diet (meat, dairy products, and eggs have no fiber at all) helps “wash away” excess cholesterol in your digestive tract.

Lowering Your Cholesterol Level

Thanks to the dedicated efforts of the meat, dairy, and egg industries, many Americans still believe that animal products are necessary for good health. One of the largest studies of lifestyle and health found the heart disease mortality rates for lacto-ovo vegetarian males to be only one-third that of meat-eating men.⁵ The *British Medical Journal* published findings from a study concluding that lifelong vegans have a 57 percent reduced risk of death from heart disease.⁶

Don't settle for halfway measures; you'll only be half as healthy as you could be. It's never too late to change your habits and improve your health. For breakfast, forget bacon and eggs and enjoy oatmeal, cereal, bagels, scrambled tofu, or fresh fruit smoothies. For lunch, try salads, vegetable-based soups, or veggie “burgers” and “dogs.”

For dinner, make spaghetti with marinara sauce instead of meat sauce, fix bean burritos instead of beef tacos, or try vegetable lasagna, using soft tofu or nutritional yeast instead of ricotta cheese. Virtually any meat-based dish can be made with vegetables or with soy substitutes that mimic meat flavor. Try Tofutti or other nondairy ice creams for dessert.

Eating out? Chinese, Mexican, Thai, and Indian restaurants offer an array of tasty vegetable and/or tofu dishes. More and more American restaurants offer veggie or portobello burgers or pizza (hold the cheese); and you can always ask for a vegetable plate with a baked potato or rice or try the salad bar. Be creative!

(OVER)

Meatless meals can be as tasty as they are healthful.

Preventing Heart Attacks

- Become a botanical gourmet. Choose beans, grains, vegetables, and fruits. Avoid meats, fish, eggs, and cheese.
- Include high-fiber foods in your diet. Whole-wheat bread, brown rice, oats, and vegetables supply fiber, which helps lower cholesterol.
- Avoid dairy products; they contain cholesterol and saturated fats. Calcium can be obtained from vegetables, nuts, and beans.
- Avoid tobacco. Smoking promotes atherosclerosis and robs your body of oxygen.
- Have your blood pressure and cholesterol level checked regularly.
- Exercise regularly. Walking, running, tennis, and any other activity that increases the heart rate is helpful.
- Write to PETA for delicious, eggless, nondairy vegetarian recipes.

Resources

¹American Heart Association, "Heart Attack and Angina Statistics," 3 Oct. 2003 <<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4591>>.

²Neal Barnard, *Food for Life* (New York: Harmony Books, 1993) 34.

³W.C. Roberts, "Preventing and Arresting Coronary Atherosclerosis," *American Heart Journal* 130 (1995): 580-600.

⁴Dean Ornish *et al.*, "Can Lifestyle Changes Reverse Coronary Heart Disease?" *The Lancet* 336 (1990): 624-6.

⁵R.L. Phillips *et al.*, "Coronary Heart Disease Mortality Among Seventh-Day Adventists With Differing Dietary Habits: A Preliminary Report," *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 31 (1978): S191-S198.

⁶M. Thorogood *et al.*, "Plasma Lipids and Lipoproteins in Groups With Different Dietary Practices Within Britain," *British Medical Journal* 295 (1987): 351-3.