

Diet theories and heart health

Good nutrition plays an important role in heart health. You may have heard about different diets or eating patterns being promoted for their heart health benefits; however, there may not be strong evidence to support them. This information sheet discusses some popular dietary trends.

Mediterranean

The Mediterranean eating pattern is a mostly plant-based diet with plenty of whole grains, vegetables, legumes, fruit, nuts and seeds. It includes moderate amounts of fish, small amounts of low-fat dairy and poultry, and minimal red meat. Meals are prepared with herbs and spices instead of salt, and extra virgin olive oil is used liberally.

How does this work?

The Mediterranean eating pattern is high in fibre, antioxidants, omega 3, unsaturated fats and essential nutrients. This has an anti-inflammatory effect which can help to reduce the build-up of fatty plaque in blood vessels.

Is this recommended for heart health?

Yes. Research has shown this diet to reduce the risk of heart disease, as well as other chronic health conditions.

DASH

The DASH (dietary approaches to stop hypertension) diet was designed to reduce blood pressure. It has also been shown to aid weight loss and lower cholesterol.

This eating pattern includes plenty of vegetables, fruit and whole grains, and moderate amounts of reduced-fat dairy products, lean meats, fish, poultry, nuts, seeds, legumes and vegetable oils.

Foods high in salt, sugar and saturated fat are limited (including fatty meats, full-fat dairy foods, and oils such as coconut, palm kernel and palm oil).

How does this work?

The DASH diet encourages you to reduce salt (sodium) and include foods rich in potassium, calcium and magnesium. This in turns helps to lower blood pressure.

Is this recommended for heart health?

Yes. This eating pattern is flexible, balanced, and has been demonstrated to be effective.

The paleo diet

It is a high protein, high fat, low carbohydrate diet, based on foods which may have been hunted or gathered during the Paleolithic period.

This diet promotes limiting processed foods, which is beneficial. However, this diet can be high in saturated fats and restricts grains, legumes, dairy. Whole grains and legumes feature widely in diets that are protective of heart health.

Is this recommended for heart health?

No. Most Australians need to eat more fruit and vegetables and fewer discretionary foods, but this can be achieved without restricting entire food groups.

The ketogenic diet

A ketogenic (keto) diet is an extremely low carbohydrate diet, with a moderate amount of protein and a large amount of fat. The body switches to using fat instead of glucose as its main fuel source, producing ketones. Excessive ketones in the body can be dangerous.

Is this recommended for heart health?

No. Due to the very low carbohydrate content of this diet, whole grains, fruit, some vegetables and legumes are restricted. These foods are known to be beneficial for heart health. It may be difficult to meet your nutritional requirements with this diet.

What about coconut oil?

Coconut oil is very high in saturated fat. Saturated fats can increase LDL (unhealthy) cholesterol in the body, which may increase the risk of heart disease.

Coconut oil is high in a certain saturated fatty acid, which can help to increase HDL (healthy) cholesterol, but it also increases LDL (unhealthy) cholesterol at the same time.

Is this recommended for heart health?

No. Coconut oil is high in saturated fat. Unsaturated fats, such as extra virgin olive oil, have been shown to be more beneficial for heart health. It helps to increase the HDL cholesterol without increasing LDL cholesterol.

What about antioxidants?

Foods rich in antioxidants such as fruit, vegetables, tea and raw cocoa powder are known to provide benefits for heart health.

It is not recommended to start drinking red wine if you don't drink alcohol. However, if you swapped from another type of alcoholic beverage to red wine, within safe alcohol guidelines, this would increase your antioxidant intake. It is not recommended to eat more chocolate, as the antioxidant content is much less than raw cocoa powder.

Supplements or tablets containing antioxidants have not been shown to provide the same benefit as the naturally occurring antioxidants found in foods.

Is this recommended for heart health?

In general, research studies have not shown antioxidant supplements or tablets to be beneficial for heart health and a food first approach, including plenty of vegetables and fruit, is recommended.

If you have a specific nutrient deficiency, a Doctor or Dietitian may recommend a supplement to correct this.

More Information:

The Australian Heart Foundation
www.heartfoundation.org.au

Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute
www.baker.edu.au

Australian Dietary Guidelines
www.eatforhealth.gov.au

Better Health Channel
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>

Nutrition Australia
www.nutritionaustralia.org.au

Healthy Food Guide
www.healthyfoodguide.com.au

Alcohol Guidelines
<https://nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/alcohol>

Dietitians Association of Australia
<https://daa.asn.au/smart-eating-for-you/>