

Happy Heart Health Month: Five Nutritious Ways to Protect Your Heart

No matter what age you are, your heart is the most important muscle in your body. So you want to keep it healthy for a long time, right? There are many contributing factors to keeping your heart healthy. Some of these factors you cannot change, such as your age and genetics, but there are many that you can control, such as good nutrition. It is important to start taking care of your heart early and often, as what you do when you are young can and will affect you as you age.

The five most important nutritious steps to heart health are:

- First is to stay in shape by exercising and maintaining a healthy weight. Being overweight or obese can have an effect on heart health, but it isn't the only risk factor.
- Second is to watch your fat intake. You want to lower your intake of trans fats. Trans fats are considered to be the worst fat of them all and the biggest impact on heart health. They are in fried foods, baked goods, and margarine. Trans fats are man-made, and can be also classified as partially hydrogenated oils.

There are good fats and cholesterol that you also want to include in your diet. These fats are unsaturated fats, which come mostly from plants such as olive oil, nuts and seeds, and avocado, as well as come from fish such as salmon. HDL "good" cholesterol is also important to your diet because it can help to lower your LDL cholesterol, and help to protect the heart. Populations known for their high intake of fish and plant based products are known to have better heart health.

- Third is to limit excessive alcohol and salt consumption. Drinking too much alcohol can increase blood pressure and raise some levels of fats in the blood. Excessive amounts of alcohol can strain the heart in many ways, so just drink in moderation if you choose to do so. We all know that salt makes food taste good, but it can increase your blood pressure. Just remember, that sodium intake for a healthy person is less than 2300mg per day. You can use other herbs and spices to make food tasty, including lemon juice and garlic, or use sea salt which is more concentrated and you will use less!
- Fourth is to include and increase amounts of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low fat dairy, legumes and lean meats into your diet. These items are heart healthy because they provide an array of essential vitamins and minerals that the body (and the heart) needs to function properly. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes lend a good amount of fiber to the diet, which helps in many ways, such as clearing out cholesterol, as well as making you feel fuller so you eat less. The lean meats and low fat dairy lend good sources of protein to the diet without all the extra fat.
- Fifth is to have an energy balance by balancing your diet (what you eat) and lifestyle (exercise). Include exercise in your day, and eat a variety of foods. This will help you to, overall, feel better, and to live a heart healthy lifestyle.

Granted, it isn't possible to do all of these all the time, but it is good if you just keep them in the back of your mind. Remember, life is about balance and moderation.

Here is a simple, heart healthy recipe for Penne pasta with Chicken and Asparagus:

Serves 2

Ingredients

- 1 1/2 cups uncooked, whole grain penne pasta
- 1 cup chopped asparagus
- 6 ounces boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 2 cloves garlic, minced

1 can (14.5 ounces) diced tomatoes with herbs, including juice

1 ounce soft goat cheese, crumbled

1 tablespoon Parmesan cheese

Directions

1. Fill a large pot 3/4 full with water and bring to a boil. Add the pasta and cook until al dente (tender), 10 to 12 minutes, or according to the package directions. Drain the pasta thoroughly. Set aside.
2. In a pot fitted with a steamer basket, bring 1 inch of water to a boil. Add the asparagus. Cover and steam until tender-crisp, about 2 to 3 minutes.
3. Spray a large nonstick frying pan with cooking spray. Add the chicken and garlic and sauté over medium-high heat. Cook until the chicken is golden brown, about 5 to 7 minutes. Add the tomatoes, including their juice, and simmer 1 minute more.
4. In a large bowl, add the cooked pasta, steamed asparagus, chicken mixture and goat cheese. Toss gently to mix evenly.
5. To serve, divide the pasta mixture between 2 plates. Sprinkle each serving with 1/2 tablespoon Parmesan cheese. Serve immediately.

For more heart healthy recipes go to: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/heart-healthy-recipes/RE00098>