



Healthy Fats for a Healthy Heart

Eating foods with “healthy fats” is good for you. These foods taste good, too. Healthy fats help:

- Protect your heart and blood vessels.
- Support your energy and thinking processes.

Aim for a small amount of healthy fat every day. Also eat plenty of fresh vegetables, fruits, whole grains such as brown rice and oatmeal, and low-fat protein foods such as beans, tofu, skinless poultry, and low-fat dairy products.

Keep in mind that all fats—healthy and unhealthy—are high in calories. Eating too many calories can lead to weight gain, which is stressful for your heart and blood vessels. Eat healthy fats in moderation.

The most important heart-healthy fats are:

- Monounsaturated fats
- Polyunsaturated fats, especially omega-3 fatty acids

These fats help protect your heart and blood vessels by:

- Increasing levels of HDL (“good”) cholesterol in your blood.
- Reducing levels of LDL (“bad”) cholesterol in your blood.

Healthy fats

Omega-3 fatty acids are essential for good health. We can only get omega-3s from foods and supplements. Our bodies don’t make them.

Fish, especially fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, and sardines, contain omega-3 fatty acids called EPA and DHA. Certain plant foods, such as walnuts and flaxseeds, are high in the omega-3 fatty acids called ALA.

Omega-3 fatty acids support your heart and blood vessel health by:

- Lowering blood pressure and improving blood flow.
- Reducing triglycerides (fats) in the blood.
- Helping reduce inflammation in the blood vessels.

Unhealthy fats

Avoid or limit foods that contain unhealthy fats. They can increase your risks for heart disease and stroke.

Your heart and blood vessels can be harmed by saturated fats, especially trans fats. Saturated fats are found in meat, dairy products, and in coconut and palm kernel oil. Trans fats are most often found in snack foods, fast food, and baked goods such as biscuits, pastries, and desserts.

These fats raise levels of LDL cholesterol and inflammation in the blood vessels. This can cause blockages (plaque) in the blood vessels and increase the risk of heart attack, stroke, and other health problems.

Dietary cholesterol

Cholesterol in the food you eat (dietary cholesterol) isn’t the same as the cholesterol in your blood that can clog your blood vessels. At this time, studies show that dietary cholesterol may raise LDL blood cholesterol, but that saturated fat is more harmful to the blood vessels than dietary cholesterol.

Foods such as egg yolks and shellfish are high in dietary cholesterol, but low in saturated fat. There’s no current recommendation for the number of eggs most people should eat in a week. To reduce dietary cholesterol and saturated fat, you can eat just the egg whites, and limit or avoid egg yolks.

Choose foods with *healthy* fats

Be sure to get these foods in your diet:

- Olive oil and canola oil can be used for cooking and in salads daily.
- Walnuts are a good source of omega-3 fatty acids. All nuts contain healthy fats. Eat a serving (¼ cup) of unsalted nuts 4 times a week.
- Soybeans, kidney beans, flaxseeds, and chia seeds are plant foods high in omega-3 fatty acids.
- Avocados are high in healthy monounsaturated fats.
- Fish, especially salmon, mackerel, and sardines, are high in omega-3 fatty acids. Aim for 2 to 3 servings a week. A serving is 4 ounces, or about the size of a deck of cards. Pregnant women should limit fish intake to reduce mercury in the diet. If you're pregnant, talk to your doctor about the amount and types of seafood you should eat.

Avoid or limit foods with *unhealthy* fats

Reduce your intake of these foods:

- Snack foods, such as chips and cookies
- “Fast foods,” especially fried foods
- High-fat dairy foods, such as butter, cream, and ice cream
- Fatty and processed meats, such as bacon, sausages, hot dogs, lunchmeat, fatty beef and pork, and poultry skin
- Pastries, such as donuts, croissants, muffins, cinnamon rolls, and churros

If you need help making healthy eating choices, ask your doctor to refer you to a registered dietitian.

Talk with your doctor before taking supplements

Some people may benefit from taking omega-3 supplements, such as fish oil, in addition to eating foods high in omega-3s. However, very high levels of omega-3s may slow blood clotting and can increase bruising or bleeding.

Talk to your doctor before taking omega-3 supplements if:

- You're pregnant or breastfeeding.
- You have liver disease.
- You take anticoagulant medication such as warfarin (Coumadin), or antiplatelet medication such as aspirin, clopidogrel (Plavix), prasugrel (Effient), or ticagrelor (Brilinta).

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.

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