

How does my diet affect my risk for heart disease?

A study started in the 1950s that compared heart disease rates in men from 7 different countries was one of the first to suggest that diet and lifestyle may play a role.¹ Men from countries that ate less saturated fat had much lower rates of heart disease than American men.

The main way that a healthy diet helps your heart is by reducing your risk of developing risk factors for heart disease. For example, cutting back on saturated fat lowers blood [cholesterol](#) levels.

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Eating a diet low in sodium lowers [blood pressure](#)

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and eating more whole grains reduces your risk of developing [diabetes](#)

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Figuring out exactly which parts of a healthy diet lower heart disease is difficult. It may be that some of the benefit is because the more “healthy” foods you eat, the less room you have for unhealthy foods. In addition, people who eat a healthy diet usually have a healthier lifestyle (they exercise more and are less likely to smoke or be overweight) than people who don't eat a healthy diet.

Will a healthy diet lower my risk of dying early?

Yes. A study that looked at how much fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, and lean meats or poultry more than 42,000 healthy older women ate (average age 61 years) found that women with the healthiest diets were 31% less likely to die within 6 years than women with the worst diets.⁵ They were also less likely to die of heart disease specifically.

The Nurses' Health Study followed nearly 70,000 healthy women aged 38 to 63 years for up to 12 years assessing their diet for Western style pattern (higher amounts of processed and red meat, desserts, high-fat dairy, and refined grains) and healthy dietary pattern (higher intakes fruits, vegetables, legumes, fish, poultry, and whole grains).⁶ Eating a healthy diet reduced the risk of heart disease by 24% while the unhealthy Western style diet increased the risk of heart disease by 46%.

Are some foods good or bad for the heart?

Every other day, there seems to be a new study showing that one food or another is good or bad for your heart. In reality, there is far more research recommending a healthy diet than any single food. For example, there is a lot of research showing that diets rich in fruits and vegetables lower your risk of heart disease, but very little saying that one type of fruit or vegetable is better than another (variety is key). And there's even more research showing that it's a combination of healthy choices, not just fruits and veggies, that really counts.

Do Americans eat a healthy diet?

There is room for improvement in the typical American diet. From 1985 to 2000, Americans added about 300 calories to their daily diet.⁷ Specifically, the amount of grains increased 46%; unfortunately this was mostly refined grains (e.g., white bread); whole grains are better. Added fats increased 24% and added sugars by 23% compared with a small increase (8%) for fruits and vegetables. Meat and dairy consumption fell 1% and total dietary fat remained the same between 1985 and 1999, but rose 6% in 2000. On average, Americans get 33% of daily calories from fat.

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For much more about diet, visit our [Heart Healthy Diet](#) section.

References

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