

Blueprint for A Healthy Heart

The American Heart Association (AHA) released nutrition recommendations based on research published in the journal *Circulation* in October 2016. The AHA Blueprint for Healthy Eating summarizes the scientific evidence on the healthiest food choices into practical tips health professionals can share with their patients to prevent cardiovascular disease. While the Blueprint contains no new, earth-shattering information, it is a good summary of practical, realistic suggestions that can be incorporated to fit each person's taste preferences, cultural food heritage, and budget. Choosing foods that provide essential vitamins and minerals; and are also low in calories, sodium, added sugar and saturated fat, helps achieve and maintain a healthy body weight, decrease risk of cardiovascular disease, and improve overall health.

The Blueprint recommends:

1. Build meals around **vegetables**, fruit and whole grains for a wide range of essential nutrients and fiber. Even with all of the health messages promoting these foods, more than 80% of Americans still don't eat the recommended 2-3 cups of vegetables per day on a regular basis.
2. Include a variety of **protein sources low in saturated fat** such as poultry, fish, legumes, and nuts and use less red meat and processed meats such as deli lunch meats, smoked or cured meats, and sausage. Red meat and processed meats are linked to increased risk of heart disease and some types of cancer, and should be consumed far less often.
3. **Choose nonfat and low-fat dairy products**, or nonfat and low-fat dairy alternatives such as almond, rice, or soy-based milks that are fortified with calcium and vitamin D and contain no added sugar. While the type of saturated fat in milk, yogurt and cheese may be slightly less harmful than other types of saturated fat, it clearly does not provide heart-healthy benefits found in oils high in polyunsaturated fats like olive oil, canola oil, safflower oil, and sesame oil.
4. **Avoid tropical oils** including coconut and palm-kernel oils. The majority of scientific evidence supports replacing saturated fat found in coconut and palm-kernel oils, red meat, and processed foods with healthier polyunsaturated fat.
5. **Limit sodium**, which is found primarily in processed foods like cold-cuts and cured meat, pizza, soup, sandwiches, and restaurant foods.
6. **Reduce sweets** like candy, cookies, and cakes; and sweetened beverages such as lemonade, fruit drinks, and sweetened tea. A high sugar intake leads to increased risk of overweight and obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and liver and kidney disease. The Blueprint recommends no more than 100 calories or 6 teaspoons per day of added sugar for most women, and no more than 150 calories or 9 teaspoons of added sugar per day for most men. Since a 20-oz bottle of soda or sweetened beverage like lemonade or sweetened ice tea often contains 14 grams of sugar, choosing water or sugar-free beverages is a key strategy.
7. **In addition to healthy food choices, incorporate 150 minutes of physical activity into your weekly routine. That works out to about 20-30 minutes most days of the week.**

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