

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Diet and Heart Disease

I'm concerned about heart disease. Is there a special diet to help prevent or control it?

Heart disease is the #1 killer of both women and men. Eating a heart-healthy diet is key to help reduce your risk factors for heart disease, like high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, overweight, and obesity. It also will help you control these conditions if you already have them.

Here are some general guidelines for heart-healthy eating:

Choose foods low in saturated and trans fats. Foods low in saturated fat include fruits, vegetables, whole grain foods, and low-fat or nonfat dairy products.

Choose a diet moderate in total fat. Keep total fat intake between 20 to 35 percent of calories. This will give you enough calories to satisfy your hunger, which can help you to eat fewer calories, stay at a healthy weight, and lower your blood cholesterol level. To keep your total fat intake moderate, try to substitute unsaturated fat for saturated fat.

Choose foods low in cholesterol. Try to eat fruit, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat or nonfat dairy products, and moderate amounts of lean meats, skinless poultry, and fish. Eat plenty of soluble fiber, which may help lower your LDL ("bad") blood cholesterol. Good sources are oat bran, oatmeal, beans, peas, rice bran, barley, citrus fruits, and strawberries.

Cut down on sodium. If you have high blood pressure as well as high blood cholesterol — and many people do — your health care provider may tell you to cut down on sodium or salt. Even if you don't have high blood pressure or cholesterol, try to have no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium each day. To flavor your food, reach for herbs and spices rather than high-sodium table salt. Be sure to read the labels of seasoning mixes because some contain salt.

Watch your body weight. It is not uncommon for overweight people to have higher blood cholesterol than people who are not overweight. When you reduce the fat in your diet, you cut down not only on cholesterol and saturated fat but on calories as well. This will help you to lose weight and improve your blood cholesterol, both of which will reduce your risk for heart disease.

It's hard to know if my portions are too big or too small for a healthy diet. Do I have to measure everything I'm eating?

It can be hard to learn if your portions of food are putting you over amounts of things you're trying to control. It doesn't help that sizes for everything from bananas to soft drinks have gotten larger in the past 20 years. It's not enough to eat the right kinds of food to maintain a healthy weight or to lose weight. Eating the right amount of food at each meal is just as important. If you are a healthy eater, it is possible to sabotage your efforts by eating more than the recommended amount of food. A serving is a specific amount of food, and it might be smaller than you realize. Here are some examples:

- A serving of meat (boneless, cooked weight) is two to three ounces, or roughly the size of the palm of your hand, a deck of cards, or an audiocassette tape.
- A serving of chopped vegetables or fruit is 1/2 cup, or approximately half a baseball or a rounded handful.
- A serving of fresh fruit is one medium piece, or the size of a baseball.

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- A serving of cooked pasta, rice, or cereal is 1/2 cup, or half a baseball or a rounded handful.
- A serving of cooked beans is 1/2 cup, or half a baseball or a rounded handful.
- A serving of nuts is 1/3 cup, or a level handful for an average adult.
- A serving of peanut butter is two tablespoons, about the size of a golf ball.

I'm confused by all of the labels I see on foods, like "fat free" and "low calorie." What do these terms mean?

Terms like these are on many food packages. Here are some definitions based on one serving of a food. If you eat more than one serving, you will go over these levels of calories, fat, cholesterol, and sodium.

- Calorie-free: fewer than 5 calories
- Low calorie: 40 calories or fewer
- Reduced calorie: at least 25% fewer calories than the regular food item has
- Fat free: less than ½ gram of fat
- Low fat: 3 grams of fat or fewer
- Reduced fat: at least 25% less fat than the regular food item has
- Cholesterol free: fewer than 2 milligrams cholesterol and no more than 2 grams of saturated fat
- Low cholesterol: 20 milligrams or fewer cholesterol and 2 grams or less saturated fat
- Sodium free: fewer than 5 milligrams sodium
- Very low sodium: fewer than 35 milligrams sodium
- Low sodium: fewer than 140 milligrams sodium
- High fiber: 5 grams or more fiber

For More Information

U.S. Federal Government Nutrition.gov Internet: www.nutrition.gov