

Heart health:

What you need
to know



Butter and eggs are back on the menu as recent scientific findings debunk the myth that saturated fats cause heart disease. This begs the question: if saturated fat isn't to blame, then what is? The INTERHEART study, published in *The Lancet*, analysed 30,000 people and found that changing certain lifestyle behaviours could prevent at least 90 per cent of all heart disease. And what science is now showing is that heart disease is not simply an unfortunate product of our genetic code; rather, what we eat, how much we exercise, the amount of stress we're under and how our bodies handle environmental toxins are much more to blame when it comes to cardiovascular disease. This is exciting news because to some extent, it enables us to take our health into our own hands.

Ditch the sugar and don't fear fat

Cardiovascular and metabolic disease share similar characteristics such as inflammation, insulin resistance and stress. Over the past few decades, fat was proclaimed the enemy when it came to combatting heart disease, but the truth is that dietary sugars have the most impact on the risk of cardiovascular disease. To put it simply, added sugars increase blood fats more than dietary fats do, but due to inaccurate scientific findings since the late '70s, many people have feared dietary fat and aren't getting the recommended amount of healthy fats in their daily diet.

While our Paleolithic ancestors ate about 22 grams of sugar per year, in today's Western societies, many people get far more than this per day. The consumption of refined sugar and grains has been associated with multiple cardiovascular risk factors, including elevated blood fats (triglycerides), low 'good' cholesterol (HDL) and decreased insulin sensitivity. High-fructose corn syrup – which is found in soft drinks – is one of the worst offenders because it goes straight to the liver, where it triggers lipogenesis, which is the production of fats such as triglycerides and cholesterol.

In reality, good fats – like that found in nuts, fish and avocado – are crucial for our health. These fats are small amounts of saturated fat, significant omega-3s and monounsaturated fats. The fats to avoid are trans fats or hydrogenated fats, which are found in processed foods and margarine, and refined vegetable oils such as sunflower, corn, cottonseed, sesame, peanut, soybean and canola oils, which contain pro-inflammatory omega-6s.

The good news is that butter is back on the menu. Organic butter from grass-fed cows, that is. One of the reasons why you should choose organic butter is because fat accumulates toxins such as pesticides. So why opt for grass-fed? Because the butter



accumulates toxins such as pesticides. So why opt for grass-fed? Because the butter from grass-fed cows has three to five times more CLA (conjugated linoleic acid) and more vitamin A than butter from non-grass-fed cows. CLA promotes intestinal health by 'feeding' our good bacteria and fighting inflammation, which is important for reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease. Organic butter also boasts heart-happy vitamin K2, which is also found in fermented foods. Vitamin K's role is to deposit calcium in appropriate locations, such as in the bones and teeth.



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Balancing our blood sugar levels is one of the most important things we can do to protect our heart. This is because increased insulin – which is caused from a high-carbohydrate diet – is a precursor to heart disease.

In order to balance our blood sugar levels, it's important to eat low-GI foods. And as a general guide, foods that rank 55 or under on the glycemic index are best. It's also important to take a look at the foods that increase our insulin. Milk products for example, are some of the highest insulin-stimulating foods.

Additionally, we need to focus on eating less cereal, bread and pasta. All carbohydrates eventually break down into sugar and can cause spikes in blood sugar and insulin, both of which contribute to oxidative damage and inflammation, which can lead to cardiovascular disease.

A good way to balance blood sugar levels is to eat lean protein, healthy fats and fibre-rich foods with every meal, as these macronutrients help to blunt the glycemic effect of foods. Just be sure to choose healthy fats such as coconut oil, cold-water fatty fish, avocado, nuts, seeds and olive oil.

Fibre is also an important part of a healthy diet because it helps us to eliminate excess cholesterol from the body. Cholesterol binds to bile acids and is excreted via bowel movements. I suggest aiming for 50 grams of fibre daily. Our Paleolithic

bowel movements. I suggest aiming for 50 grams of fibre daily. Our Paleolithic ancestors used to eat between 50 to 100 grams of fibre every day, but in today's culture many people aren't getting 20 grams of fibre daily. If you're not moving your bowel at least once a day then you need to focus on increasing your fibre intake.



The inflammation connection

Omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids play a vital role in heart health. When you have too much omega-6 in your system you will predispose yourself to inflammation, which is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Unfortunately, in today's culture, far too many of us are getting a whack of omega-6s and not enough omega-3s. The ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 should be about 1:1 or at most 4:1. Instead, we're seeing ratios up to about 20:1 or more. This is because omega-6 fats are ubiquitous in the foods most people eat today. They're derived from sunflower, corn, cottonseed, sesame, peanut, soybean and canola oils, which are readily found in processed foods such as salad dressings, biscuits and crackers. Ensure you're getting enough omega-3 fats from cold-water fish, dark leafy greens, nuts and seeds such as flax and chia. Supplementing with a fish or algae oil is also a great idea.

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As a preventative step, be sure to get your C-reactive protein (CRP) levels checked. CRP levels are a marker of inflammation in the body. In fact, a study from Harvard found that those with high levels of CRP were at greater risk of heart disease than those with high cholesterol.

And it's not just eating the wrong kinds of fats that make you more susceptible to inflammation. Food sensitivities also play a big role. It's been found that gluten sensitivity (not coeliac disease) can actually trigger heart attacks. Food sensitivities might also be a factor if you're struggling to lose weight. It's a good idea to get an IgG (immunoglobulin G) food sensitivity test done or do an elimination diet with a trained health professional to see where food sensitivities might be lurking so you can eliminate offending foods and reduce your inflammation.



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Size matters...as does oxidation

The next time you see your doctor and he tells you your cholesterol is dangerously high and you need to go on a statin (which causes all kinds of side effects like increasing your risk for insulin resistance, which is one of the key risk factors for heart disease), ask him what your LDL particle size is. Large, fluffy LDL particles are not harmful; it's the small, dense LDL particles that cause damage. Insulin resistance often causes small particles to form, and they don't improve with statin drugs. High-carb diets produce more small, dense LDL particles and put you at higher risk of cardiovascular disease, whereas eating more saturated fats have been shown to increase LDL particle size – which is a good thing. Most doctors never measure particle size but it's the size of your LDL particles that correlates to heart disease.

Whether or not cholesterol is oxidised in your blood is also a very real concern when it comes to heart health. Oxidised cholesterol causes major problems for your cardiovascular system and this occurs when you eat too many omega-6 fats, not enough antioxidants, consume too much sugar or are overly stressed. Be sure to eat a rainbow of fruits and vegetables every day. Additionally, never cook with fats that will oxidise when you heat them, such as flax and hemp oil, and only ever cook with olive oil on very low temperatures. The safest fats to cook with include coconut oil, ghee and butter. **ANH**

DISCLAIMER

- Do not stop taking any of your medications before checking with your doctor first.
- If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, on medication or have a health condition, be sure to check with your doctor before starting any new supplements.

