

How to Focus on Heart-Healthy Eating

February's [American Heart Month](#) may have come and gone, but recognizing how a healthy diet can prevent heart disease and promote overall wellness is a concern year-round. March is also National Nutrition Month.

"The best way to take care of your heart is by choosing foods that support overall health," says Valerie Butram, a Community Outreach Registered Dietitian with Lee Health. "We can empower ourselves to enjoy a nutritious diet and choose a lifestyle that helps prevent and manage cardiovascular disease."

Valerie offers a smorgasbord of heart-healthy tips that, when combined with regular physical activity, can have a lasting impact on heart health.

Heart-healthy eating guidelines

[When it comes to your heart, what you eat matters](#). Healthier eating doesn't mean bland, boring, or tasteless meals.

According to Val, it all begins with making small, mindful changes to your diet, which can lead to big improvements in your heart health.

"Your best investment in heart health is to build nutrition habits that support long-term wellness," she says. "Eating a heart-healthy diet doesn't mean giving up flavor or variety, either. It simply involves making smart choices and being mindful of what you eat."

Next time you are food shopping, consider these food types to create a well-balanced diet:

- Fruits and vegetables. Aim to fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables at every meal. They are rich in vitamins, minerals, and fiber, which are essential for heart health. Try adding a variety of colorful produce to your diet to ensure you're getting a broad spectrum of nutrients.
- Whole grains. Whole grains like oats, brown rice, quinoa, and whole wheat provide more fiber and nutrients than refined grains. Fiber is known to help reduce cholesterol levels and improve heart health. Replace white bread, pasta, and rice with their whole-grain counterparts.
- Lean proteins such as fish, beans, nuts, and low-fat dairy. Fish, especially fatty fish like salmon and mackerel, are high in omega-3 fatty acids, which benefit heart health. Legumes and nuts are also excellent sources of protein and healthy fats.
- Healthy fats from sources like olive oil, avocados, and nuts. Not all fats are bad for your heart. Healthy fats can help reduce bad cholesterol levels and improve heart health. For instance, use olive oil for cooking and dressings, and snack on nuts and seeds for a nutritious boost.
- Limit processed foods and those high in added sugars and salt. Try to limit your intake of these items. Instead, choose whole, unprocessed foods whenever possible.

Make meal-planning your ally for better health

Making meals at home is one of the most effective ways to stick with heart-healthy guidelines, Val advises. Preparing home meals lets you control ingredients and portion sizes. It also helps you stick to heart-healthy guidelines. Consider meal prepping for the week, so you always have nutritious options available, she adds.

Dining out? Tips for making healthier choices

You don't have to give up eating right when dining out. Val says, "When dining out, looking at menus ahead of time and requesting substitutions can help you make better choices."

Many restaurants offer lighter options or are willing to accommodate special requests. Don't be afraid to ask for dressings on the side, swap fries for a side salad, or choose grilled options over fried.

For example, order sandwiches without mayonnaise, tartar sauce, or special sauces. Try mustard or low-fat mayonnaise instead. For more hacks on how to make heart-healthy choices when eating away from home, visit [this tip sheet](#) from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

Heart-healthy diets that may be right for you

Many people try to improve their heart health with popular diets, such as the Mediterranean diet and the DASH diet.

- **Mediterranean diet.** Inspired by the traditional cuisines of countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, a [Mediterranean-style diet](#) typically emphasizes plant-based foods, healthy fats, whole grains, and lean proteins like seafood. This eating pattern limits red meat and sweets while encouraging the use of olive oil, a heart-healthy monounsaturated fat.
- **DASH** (dietary approaches to stop hypertension) eating plan. Designed to lower blood pressure by reducing sodium and unhealthy fats while increasing fiber and nutrient-rich foods, the [DASH eating plan](#) requires no special foods and instead provides daily and weekly nutritional goals.

While diet is a powerful tool for heart health, some risk factors—such as age and family history—can't be controlled. That's why it's important to consult with your doctor and consider working with a [registered dietitian](#) for personalized nutrition guidance, Val advises.

Lee Health Solutions

Ready to make diet and lifestyle changes for improved health? Speak with a [Lee Health Solutions](#) program navigator to find the right nutrition program for you.

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Lee Health Heart Institute

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