

Food and nutrition: Prevent heart disease with food.

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Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the global leading cause of death, with an average of 1 in 4 people dying from heart disease annually in the United States. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 75% of deaths from CVD can be decreased by lifestyle management. One in three Americans have a risk factor for heart disease that can be prevented. Preventable risk factors include abnormal lipid panel, particularly small, dense LDL particles; being overweight or obese, especially when the weight is concentrated in the abdominal region; high blood pressure; uncontrolled diabetes; physical inactivity; smoking; and high stress and anger levels. The American Heart Association states that 99% of Americans need to improve their heart health.

This lecture will focus on reviewing the latest research on food and nutrients that may protect the heart and prevent heart disease. Cardiovascular diseases (CVD) are growing contributors to global disease burdens, with epidemics of CVD advancing across many regions of the world which are experiencing a rapid health transition. Diet and nutrition have been extensively investigated as risk factors for major cardiovascular diseases like coronary heart disease (CHD) and stroke and are also linked to other cardiovascular risk factors like diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity.

The interpretation of evidence needs to involve a critical appraisal of methodological issues related to measurement of exposures, nature of outcome variables, types of research design and careful separation of cause, consequence and confounding as the basis for observed associations. Adequate evidence is available, from studies conducted within and across populations, to link several nutrients, minerals, food groups and dietary patterns with an increased or decreased risk of CVD. Dietary fats associated with an increased risk of CHD include trans-fats and saturated fats, while polyunsaturated fats are known to be protective. Dietary sodium is associated with elevation of blood pressure, while dietary potassium lowers the risk of hypertension and stroke. Regular frequent intake of fruits and vegetables is protective against hypertension, CHD and stroke. Composite diets (such as DASH diets, Mediterranean diet, 'prudent' diet) have been demonstrated to reduce the risk of hypertension and CHD.

Sufficient knowledge exists to recommend nutritional interventions, at both population and individual levels, to reduce cardiovascular risk. That knowledge should now be translated into policies which promote healthy diets and discourage unhealthy diets. This requires coordinated action at the level of governments, international organizations, civil society and responsible sections of the food industry.

The second half of the 20th century witnessed major health transitions in the world, propelled by socio-economic and technological changes that profoundly altered life expectancy and ways of living, while creating an unprecedented human capacity to use science to prolong and enhance life. The most globally pervasive change among these health transitions has been the rising burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). Epidemics of NCDs are presently emerging, or accelerating, in most developing countries¹. Cardiovascular diseases (CVD), cancers, diabetes, neuropsychiatric ailments and other chronic diseases are becoming major contributors to the burden of disease, even as infections and nutritional deficiencies are receding as leading contributors to death and disability.

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