

HEART HEALTH: BEYOND THE BASICS

Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC

We tend to think of hearts in February thanks to Valentine's Day, but did you know February is also National Heart Health Month?

Here is why that matters: Heart disease remains THE number one killer of both men and women and can lead to years of disability before a major event like a heart attack or stroke. So, it makes sense that if we want to be active and enjoy our midlife and "golden years," we need to focus on heart health now - not later.

The Basics are Important, but There's More!

You might be thinking, "OK, got it - I know I need to limit salt and saturated fat, eat more fiber, exercise regularly, and take medication if needed to manage my blood pressure and cholesterol levels." These are important, but cardiovascular health is more complex than it seems.

Recent research has shown that heart disease isn't driven by just one or two factors. Instead, it's influenced by a variety of physical, environmental, and lifestyle factors. So, what else should we be paying attention to? What are small changes we can make today that will have an impact?

What Exactly is Heart Disease?

Think of your arteries as highways that supply blood and nutrients to every organ - including the heart itself. Over time these arteries can become narrowed and stiff, making it harder for the heart to receive the oxygen and nutrients it needs, leading to cardiovascular disease and potential heart attack.

At the center of this system is the endothelium, a thin layer of cells lining all your blood vessels. The endothelium is like a non-stick coating that helps blood flow smoothly and prevents harmful substances from sticking to the artery walls. The endothelium also plays a vital role in producing nitric oxide, a gas that keeps arteries flexible and promotes circulation.

When this extremely delicate layer is damaged - whether by high blood pressure, poor diet, high blood sugar levels, or environmental toxins - it becomes more difficult for arteries to function properly leading to inflammation, arterial stiffness, and plaque build-up - key players in the development of heart disease.

How to Protect the Endothelium and Keep Arteries Healthy

Eat Micronutrient-rich Foods

- Consuming foods high in natural nitrates, such as beets, spinach, arugula, and other leafy greens, helps your body produce nitric oxide.
- Polyphenols are plant compounds that reduce inflammation and protect endothelial cells. Add polyphenol-rich foods like berries, dark chocolate, green tea, spices, and extra virgin olive oil.

Get Plenty of Omega-3 Fatty Acids

- Omega-3s, found in fatty fish (like salmon, mackerel, and sardines) walnuts, and flaxseeds help to reduce inflammation, lower triglycerides, and improve arterial function. Maintaining adequate omega-3 blood levels is critical to not only your cardiovascular system but all organs!

Limit Environmental Toxins

Research has shown that microplastics pose a significant risk to endothelial cells by causing inflammation, dysfunction, and damage. Minimize your exposure with these tips:

- Filter water and avoid drinking bottled water when possible.
- Limit processed and packaged foods, especially frozen meals and microwave popcorn, which are often high in microplastics.
- Avoid heating food in plastic, as heat can release harmful chemicals into your food.





Beyond Diet: Lifestyle Factors

In addition to diet and exercise, several lifestyle factors play a significant role as well.

Get Quality Sleep

- Poor sleep increases stress hormones and inflammation, both of which are damaging. Aim for consistent bedtimes and 7-8 hrs of quality sleep each night.

Build Strong Social Connections

- Your heart is more than just a pump - it contains neurons (about 40,000 of them!) and is often referred to as a mini-brain. These neurons correspond with your brain - your heart is "listening" to your emotional state!
- Cultivating and maintaining strong positive relationships isn't just good for your mental health - it's critical for your heart as well. Schedule coffee dates, send a quick text, or join a community group. Small actions add up to big heart health benefits!

Get Sunlight! (Safely)

- Moderate sunlight exposure does more than just boost your mood. It triggers the production of nitric oxide in the skin, which promotes vasodilation (widening of blood vessels) and improves blood flow.
- Sunlight also helps your body produce vitamin D, which is crucial for vascular health through its effect on inflammation, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels. Of course, continue to be careful not to get excessive amounts, and always avoid burning!

Making these small, intentional changes to your diet and habits can go a long way toward protecting your endothelium and keeping your arteries healthy for the long haul. The best part? These are changes you can start today!

RECIPE CORNER: ARUGULA SALAD WITH BEETS, WALNUTS, & GOAT CHEESE

INGREDIENTS:

- 5 cups fresh arugula
- 2 medium-cooked beets, sliced (roasted, steamed, or canned)
- 1/3 cup walnuts (toasted if desired)
- 2-3 oz of goat cheese, crumbled
- 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 TB balsamic vinegar or freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1 tsp Dijon mustard and/or honey (optional)
- freshly ground pepper and kosher salt

PREPARATION:

Place arugula and beets in large bowl. In a small bowl, whisk together oil, vinegar, mustard, and honey if using. Add salt and pepper to taste (about 1/4 tsp of each - don't skip - salt helps to tame the slight bitterness of arugula) Lightly dress salad with dressing (you may have a little dressing left over) Sprinkle salad with goat cheese and walnuts and serve immediately.

How will you go beyond the basics for your long-term heart health?



Heidi Roth, RD, LDN is a Registered/Licensed Dietitian, Health Coach and nutrition expert with a passion for health and wellness. She graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a BS in Nutrition and Dietetics.

