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FEATURED

Nourish Your Heart. It Matters.

1. LIFESTYLE
2. TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY
3. NUTRIENTS FOR THE HEART
4. REFRAIN FROM SMOKING
5. THE SMALL YET MIGHTY BILBERRY
6. COENZYME Q10 AKA COQ10
7. RESVERATROL
8. MAGNESIUM + HEART RHYTHM
9. IN SUMMARY

February was American Heart Month and we wanted to share and distill information about how proper nutrients and lifestyle can help nurture the long-term health of our most precious organ, the heart.

Think of this as Heart Health 101.

It is widely acknowledged by experts that nourishing our body with the right foods has a positive effect in keeping our organs healthy. While there are some we can live without, the heart is not one of them.

LIFESTYLE

A healthy diet and lifestyle are the cornerstone for our overall health and are an especially important part of preventing cardiovascular disease. The easiest way to incorporate lifestyle and dietary changes are with small baby steps.

The goal is to be consistent, not overwhelmed.

Start with your mindset. Get clear about your intentions for your health. Make a commitment to yourself. Tell a family member or a friend your goals and ask for support, if necessary. Write your goals down and keep them visible. Get an accountability partner, if that will help you transition to a healthier way of eating and living.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY

Lack of movement stresses the heart. So, making a plan for regular physical activity is important for physical and cardiovascular health.

According to [The American Heart Association](#), incorporating the following into your life will have long-term benefits for your heart and health:

- Be mindful of the best foods to fuel your body for every day life. Everyone has different needs of what they need for their body based on age, gender, lifestyle, and so many other factors
- Get enough sleep and prioritize rest to decrease stress on your heart
- Incorporate healthy distress techniques like mediation, to improve your heart health
- Ideally, per week, try for at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity, or an equal combination of both

How to begin?

Start by taking the stairs more often than the elevator. Park your car farther away. Get off the train or bus a few stops earlier. These are very simple ways to start developing new habits.

NUTRIENTS FOR THE HEART

To feed your body the optimal nutrients for heart health, [the American Heart Association](#) recommends the following dietary guidelines:

- Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables daily
- Use whole grains and products made up mostly of whole grains
- Get your protein from healthy sources, including plants such as legumes and nuts, fish and seafood, low-fat or nonfat dairy, lean and unprocessed meat and poultry
- Use liquid non-tropical vegetable oils
- Eat minimally processed foods
- Minimalize your intake of added sugars
- Reduce salt intake – eat foods prepared with little or no salt
- Ideally, no alcohol, or at least keep it min

Whether you are cooking at home, eating pre-prepared meals, ordering online, or eating in restaurants, you can still follow a heart-healthy diet.

Always read labels. Check the nutrition facts and ingredients list and choose foods with less sodium, added sugars, and saturated fats. Look for the [Health-Check mark](#) on labels to find foods the American Heart Association certified as heart-healthy.

REFRAIN FROM SMOKING

Smoking, vaping or use of tobacco products has been linked to decrease in heart health. If possible, work on quitting and have an accountability partner to help.

THE SMALL YET MIGHTY BILBERRY

Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) is a plant that produces berries very similar to the American blueberry. The plant is native to Northern Europe and is often referred to as [European blueberries](#).

Bilberries have purportedly been used [medicinally since the Middle Ages](#), while their juice was traditionally used to dye linen and paper.

Nowadays, the science-backed health benefits of bilberries continue to emerge, although more research and human studies are still needed.

According to the National Institute of Health's [NCBI](#), bilberries have been linked to various health benefits:

- Bilberries are rich in anthocyanins, which are antioxidants that may help reduce inflammation, which is the root cause of most diseases
- Bilberries may benefit our heart health because they are rich in [vitamin K](#), which assists blood flow and is good for blood vessel health. This can help prevent blood clots from forming, thus reducing our risk of heart attack and stroke.
- Bilberries may help lower blood pressure as they reduce LDL (bad) cholesterol, and increase HDL (good) cholesterol

You can eat bilberries fresh, dried in a powder, or as an extract.

COENZYME Q10 AKA COQ10

Coenzyme Q10 is an antioxidant that our body produces naturally and stores in components of the cell called mitochondria. It has associations with energy, protecting cells, and providing heart benefits.

CoQ10 is present in every cell of our body, with the highest concentrations in organs with the greatest energy demands, including the heart, kidneys, lungs, and liver.

As an antioxidant, CoQ10 also protects our cells by neutralizing free radicals. This reduces oxidative stress in the body which can cause tissue damage, inflammation, and cellular apoptosis, or cell death.

Our cells use CoQ10 for growth and maintenance. As we age, our levels of CoQ10 decrease. Lower CoQ10 levels have also been found in people with heart disease and those taking cholesterol-lowering statins

According to [Healthline](#), CoQ10 is found in foods including:

- Organ meats: Heart, liver, and kidney
- Some muscle meats: Pork, beef, and chicken
- Fatty fish: Trout, herring, mackerel, and sardine
- Vegetables: Spinach, cauliflower, and broccoli
- Fruit: Oranges and strawberries
- Legumes: Soybeans, lentils, and peanuts
- Nuts and seeds: Sesame seeds and pistachios
- Oils: Soybean and canola oil

The amount of CoQ10 found in these dietary sources, however, is not enough to significantly increase CoQ10 levels in your body so you may want to add it in the form of a supplement.

RESVERATROL

Resveratrol is a plant compound that acts like an antioxidant. The highest concentration is found mostly in the skins and seeds of grapes and berries.

According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), red wine, in moderation, has long been thought of as healthy for the heart. Certain antioxidants in red wine may help prevent coronary artery disease, the condition that leads to heart attacks. Resveratrol may help prevent damage to blood vessels, reduce low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol (“bad” cholesterol) and prevent blood clots.

Additional benefits of resveratrol include:

- May help lower blood pressure by increasing the production of nitric oxide
- May change blood fats in a healthy way
- Protecting the brain
- May increase insulin sensitivity and prevent complications from diab

[Healthline](#) says that “while resveratrol supplements are likely safe for most people, they could interact with certain medications and there’s not yet clear guidance on how to use them effectively.” Check with your doctor before taking resveratrol supplements.

MAGNESIUM + HEART RHYTHM

Magnesium is a very important mineral for our heart health.

In addition to being essential for hundreds of biochemical reactions in our body, it also helps keep our bones strong, nerves and muscles working properly, and blood sugar under control.

Magnesium is necessary for maintaining a healthy heart with a steady heartbeat and normal blood pressure.

Because it is involved with transporting electrolytes, including calcium and potassium into cells, magnesium is essential to a healthy heart rhythm.

According to [Healthline](#), research shows that magnesium deficiency, or restricted magnesium intake, increases arrhythmias, which are irregular heartbeats.

In 2019, *Cardiology Research and Practice* published a review where researchers found that a low level of magnesium in the blood may increase the risk of developing cardiovascular disease. It also stated that a low magnesium level is associated with atrial fibrillation (afib), the most common heart rate disorder. Afib happens when a malfunction in the heart's electrical system causes the upper chambers of the heart to quiver.

Magnesium In Food

Certain foods are a great source for magnesium. It can be found in:

- Almonds (just 1 ounce contains 20% of the daily need for an adult)
- Soy products like tofu or soy milk
- Green leafy vegetables like spinach
- Legumes
- Black beans
- Avocados

- Bananas

Magnesium supplements are an option. According to [Healthline](#) though, “Too much magnesium from food isn’t a danger because the kidneys excrete what the body doesn’t need. But high doses of magnesium from supplements can cause diarrhea, nausea, and stomach cramping. Extreme doses of magnesium, over 5,000 mg daily, can be fatal. If you’re concerned about your magnesium level, talk to your doctor to find out how you can get the most of this valuable nutrient.”

IN SUMMARY

Our body wants to serve us well, but it must be a collaborative relationship for optimal health. Without providing our body with proper nutrition, exercise, good sleep, enough hydration, and stress management, we put ourselves at risk for heart and health problems that may otherwise have been avoidable.