

HEALTH & FITNESS

A New Approach to Heart Health

Recent research means revised rules. Among them: Eat fat, question heart drugs, and stop sweating your blood pressure numbers.

by JOSEPH HOOPER

HEART DISEASE IS America's number one killer, accounting for about one in four deaths in the U.S. It's no wonder, then, that we spend billions in research to combat it. The problem: Such spending results in an ever-shifting flurry of studies that can be more confusing than illuminating. Take saturated fat. We've been told for decades that it's bad — yet the cover of *Time* recently directed us to "Eat Butter." We've received similarly mixed messages about the benefits of cardio training, supplements, and even the right blood pressure numbers to have. How to navigate these murky scientific waters? We did a deep dive and came up with simple steps to safeguard your heart. Think of it as cardiac wisdom for the ages — regardless of what the next blaring headline has to say.

Saturated fat has been vilified as a dietary public enemy since the 1970s. But recently a nutritional revisionism has taken hold, culminating in an article this past March in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* that scrutinized 32 studies and found no association between eating saturated fat and developing heart disease. Hence *Time*'s provocative cover line.



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But don't start eating steak with every meal just yet. Yes, we do need some saturated fat in our system, to make cell membranes and sex hormones. But unless you're a vegan, you probably get plenty. "The *Annals* study didn't find a benefit from *more* saturated fat," points out Dr. Christopher Gardner, director of nutrition studies at the Stanford Prevention Research Center.

There is evidence from the study that a type of saturated fat found in dairy called margaric acid can have a heart-protective effect, which helps explain a 16-year Australian study that found that people who ate full-fat dairy were more likely to live longer than those who ate low- or nonfat. On the flip side, red meat is still a problem, specifically the processed kind (bacon, sausage, and other cured meats). Swedish researchers tracked more than 37,000 men over 12 years and found that eating even a moderate amount of processed red meat was associated with twice the rate of heart failure.

Bottom line: Don't seek out more saturated fat, but don't obsess about excluding it from your diet, either. Moderate amounts of meat (the leaner the better) and dairy are fine.

Worry about blood sugar, not pressure

The data here is irrefutable. Sugar is the most addictive carbohydrate, and reducing it in your diet is one of the biggest steps you can take to protect your heart, says Dr. Frank Hu, at the Harvard School of Public Health. He was the lead author of a study this past February that analyzed a mountain of government health data to arrive at this disturbing conclusion: Over 10 years, those who consumed an additional 10 teaspoons of sugar

a day (the amount in one can of soda) were 30 percent more likely to die of heart disease. "Added sugar has a detrimental effect on cardiovascular health above and beyond extra body weight," Hu says. "It increases chronic inflammation and insulin resistance." What you don't need to worry so much about is getting your blood pressure below 120. Though it's long been an article of faith that lower blood pressure is healthier than higher (and that a higher number is grounds for treating "mild hypertension" with drugs), a study published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* this June found that heart attacks and strokes were no more common in people with normal systolic BP, 120 to 140, than in people with supposedly enviable below-120 readings.

Be good to your gut

Last winter, an Italian research team published a study with the sly (by science standards) title "The Way to a Man's Heart Is Through His Gut Microbiota." The idea is that food has a significant effect on heart health by the way it interacts with the bacteria in the digestive tract, or the gut microbiome. These bacteria can, for example, turn the nitrite preservatives in processed meat into toxic compounds and, as a team from the Cleveland Clinic discovered last year, transform too much choline and carnitine — nutrients in meat and dairy — into a compound called TMAO, high levels of which are linked to heart disease. A new avenue of research has shown that eating a diet high in plant fiber — vegetables, fruits, legumes — feeds the friendly bacteria that protect your gut lining. A diet high in saturated fat and refined carbohydrates does the opposite, feeding the bad bugs, which can then escape into the

bloodstream, promoting systemic inflammation and insulin resistance — prime drivers of heart disease. "Those carbs act like a bombshell in the gut," says John Bagnulo, a nutritionist who consults for the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, D.C.

You can keep gut bacteria in check with exercise, too. An Irish study this past June found that vigorous workouts were linked to a more diverse gut microbiota, which is associated with less inflammation and, therefore, a decreased risk of heart problems.

You're not logging too much cardio

Exercise may be the ultimate heart-disease prevention. Last year a review of 305 studies found that it did as good a job of forestalling heart disease as pharmaceutical drugs. Without side effects.

So what of those recent headlines warning of too much cardio for your heart? A Swedish study published in May in the *British Medical Journal* is one of the latest to attach a health penalty to doing too much. The survey found that men who had exercised long and hard when they were younger — more than five hours of cardio a week — were more likely to develop heart-rhythm problems by the time they hit 60 than those who'd worked out moderately.

The problem with these kinds of studies is that relatively few people push themselves to heart-toxic limits, says Dr. Tim Church, director of the preventive medicine research laboratory at the Pennington Bio-Medical Institute. Church just co-authored a study in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* that should dispel the health anxieties of the recreational endurance athlete. He



MAKE A GROCERY LIST WITH THESE FOODS

You can't go wrong eating fresh veggies, fruits, and legumes, as well as nuts and seeds, which pack the most nutrition into the least amount of calories. To zero in, however, here are the specific foods, according to research scientists, that are cardio champs. For magnesium, a mineral essential to heart health (and one most of us don't get enough of): dark leafy greens such as kale, arugula, spinach; squash and pumpkin seeds; mackerel; avocados. For potassium, another balm for the heart: white beans,

sweet potatoes, mushrooms. For fiber to feed the all-important gut bacteria: leeks, onions, asparagus, garlic. For antioxidants to protect the blood vessels: berries, apples, cherries, and green tea. For B vitamins to fuel the heartbeat: lean, unprocessed red meat, poultry, and any legumes. For omega-3 fatty acids: salmon, sardines, and halibut.

WHEN IN DOUBT, GO MEDITERRANEAN

A major study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* last year found eating this way — greens, fish, nuts, olive oil — lowered the incidence of heart disease, heart attacks, and heart-disease-related

deaths by 30 percent. (Researchers actually shut down the study after just under five years because the results were so conclusive.)

QUESTION ANYTHING THAT COMES IN A WRAPPER

Packaged breads and bagels, frozen dinners, and middle-aisle snack foods — even health-store products with *all-natural* or *gluten-free* buzzwords — can contain added sugar, refined carbs, and mass-produced corn and soy oils, mostly genetically modified and over-heavy in omega-6 fatty acids. When omega-6s are not adequately balanced by omega-3s from fish and

leafy greens, they can contribute to the pro-inflammatory coronary cocktail that even effective pharmaceuticals can't counter. As Dr. Michael Greger, the physician and nutritionist behind NutritionFacts.org, puts it, "Say no to drugs by saying yes to more plants."

CHEAT SHEET NO. 1

Eat for a Stronger Heart

Having a pet — particularly a dog — is associated with a decreased risk of heart attack.

CHEAT SHEET NO. 2

A Perfect Week of Exercise

CARDIO You want at least two sessions of steady-pace aerobic cardio at 65 to 75 percent of your maximum heart rate for 30 to 45 minutes. Also include two 20-minute bouts of high-intensity interval training. (Here's a solid go-to: Choose any form of cardio you want, and warm up for five minutes. Alternate going all-out for one minute, and recovering for one minute, for 10 minutes. Cool down for five minutes.)

STRENGTH Log two 30-minute workouts by any method you choose: body-weight resistance (push-ups, pull-ups, etc.) or dumbbells — or try a one-two punch by mixing strength and cardio in a routine with kettlebells, pool workouts with weights, or fast-paced circuit training.

FLEXIBILITY Stretch every day for 10 minutes. An alternative: vinyasa-style yoga, which combines flexibility and strength work with a stress-reducing mindfulness component that can help protect the heart vessels against roller-coaster stress hormones. Need more convincing? In one Yale study, people who took a six-week yoga-and-meditation program saw the function of their blood vessels improve by 17 percent.



tracked about 55,000 runners, dividing them into groups depending on how intensely they exercised. All did about the same in the heart-health department, whether they ran a lot (three hours a week or more) or a little. The real payoff came from being consistent and persistent. The runners who had been at it for at least six years had a 50 percent drop in cardiovascular mortality, no matter how many miles and minutes they did or didn't put in.

Take the right pills

In recent years, a form of heart disease called atrial fibrillation, or A-fib, has become an increasing worry. The condition causes erratic electrical signals, leading to an irregular heart rhythm and palpitations, and it increases the risk of a stroke dramatically (when the heart isn't beating properly, blood can pool in the heart, leading to clots that can travel to the brain). A study in *Circulation* found that hospitalizations for A-fib soared 23 percent from 2001 to 2010.

To combat the problem, doctors are quick to recommend blood-thinning or heart-rhythm drugs, or a surgical procedure called ablation. But two new studies suggest that the single most effective treatment is lifestyle modification. One study, published in *JAMA*, showed that when A-fib patients lost weight through diet and exercise, their blood pressure dropped, reducing the stress on the overburdened heart muscle. That allowed the heart to "remodel" itself, shrinking in size and thickness, helping reverse the onset of the disease. A new study from the same Australian research group found that patients with severe A-fib waiting for ablation surgery actually did better after a lifestyle interven-

tion than their counterparts. "Physicians get this wrong," says Dr. Mark Estes, the director of the New England Cardiac Arrhythmia Center. "They think it's their responsibility to cure A-fib. It's not. The real work has to be done by the patient."

The pills you may want to consider? Vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acid supplements, says nutritionist Kathie Swift. A recent *British Medical Journal* meta-analysis found that upping D₃ levels was associated with an 11 percent decrease in risk of death of all causes. If you're unsure whether you're getting enough — and research shows that 40 percent of us aren't — you should "test, don't guess," Swift says. A standard blood test that shows blood D levels below 20 is a reason to supplement, starting with a 2,000-IU dose of vitamin D. There's also a good case to be made for omega-3 fatty acid supplements to reduce inflammation, along with high triglycerides levels, especially if you don't eat fish regularly. (Check omega-3 levels via websites such as DirectLabs.com and WellnessFX.com.)

Drop one bad habit

Every positive health change adults made in their late thirties and forties — drinking fewer than two drinks a day, eating better, exercising more — was associated with a 15 percent decreased risk in developing coronary artery disease, according to a Northwestern University study of more than 5,000 people. (Picking up an unhealthy habit, however, increased the risk by 17 percent.) What else this proves: When it comes to your heart, you don't have to totally change your lifestyle to extend your life. ■



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