



2.9.24

/ [Nutrition](#)

# National Heart Month: Strategies for Heart Health

By [The Nutrition Services Department](#)

February is National Heart Health Month, but we can make choices to support heart health every day. According to the American Heart Association, cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the leading cause of death in the United States. Genetics can contribute to disease development, but lifestyle choices we make impact heart health in a significant way. At God's Love, our Registered Dietitian Nutritionists are dedicated to educating our community regarding disease prevention.

Here are 6 simple diet and lifestyle strategies that have been proven to promote heart health:

## **Plants Matter**

Research strongly supports plant-based diets. These include the Mediterranean diet, the DASH diet, vegetarian & vegan diets. Plant based diets aids significantly in reducing the risk of CVD. These diets are 70% identical, with the common denominator being high intakes of fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. Diets high in plants help to reduce blood pressure and plaque formation and lower cholesterol levels, which are all factors that can increase the risk of a cardiovascular event, such as heart attacks and/or strokes.

## **Nutrient-rich foods matter**

Beware of the differences between whole food vegan diets and processed food vegan diets. You can technically stick to a vegan diet by just eating Oreos, potato chips, Pepsi, and other highly-processed foods; but it's not the elimination of animal products that make a vegan eating pattern so beneficial, rather it's the replacement of animal products with nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains that benefit heart health.

## **Red meat and saturated fats matter**

Research continues to strongly suggest diets high in red meat and saturated fats are linked to an increased risk of plaque formation and high cholesterol levels. Therefore, it is suggested to limit intake by choosing lean options. We recommended consuming more fish, poultry, and plant-based proteins such as soy, nuts, seeds, legumes, and beans as your primary source of protein. The omega-3s in fish and walnuts, as well as the vitamins and minerals found in legumes and beans, can also help to reduce cholesterol levels.

## **Shopping on a budget matters**

To improve our eating habits, we need to eliminate barriers that may stop us short of our goal, and one of the most frequently reported barriers to eating fruits and vegetables on a regular basis, is cost. Eating more plants doesn't have to break the bank. By simply planning ahead one can improve diet quality without increasing cost. The following tips can promote healthy eating on a budget.

1. Don't shop hungry – Have a healthy snack before you get to the store, and plan ahead by creating a list.
2. Learn to read labels – Use the shelf tag for the cost per unit as a resource to determine which item gives you the most bang for your buck. Sometimes a 32oz container of yogurt is cheaper per unit ounce than individual 6oz containers.
3. Reduce waste – Don't buy perishable food in bulk if you don't have a plan to use it all before it may spoil. Use your freezer to store some fruits and vegetables to extend shelf life. Buying frozen fruits and vegetables can be just as nutritious as buying them fresh.
4. Get your protein – Eating more plant-based proteins like beans, legumes, tofu, and nut butters is a cost-efficient way to stretch your money. Also consider buying canned meats like chicken, salmon, and tuna.
5. Keep it simple – Don't over complicate your recipes with a lot of ingredients. Stick to your favorite sauces, herbs, and spices that are versatile in many different types of recipes. Repurpose leftovers by tossing them in rice bowls, for example.
6. "Health" foods allowed, but not required – Organic junk food is still junk food. Don't go crazy buying "superfoods" like goji berries or matcha powders if you can't afford them. A well-balanced diet is more important.

### **Physical Activity Matters**

Physical activity is critical for a long, healthy, independent life. The best physical activities are the ones you enjoy doing regularly, just check in with your doctor before starting any new exercise. Research shows even 20 minutes of physical activity a day can reduce your risk of heart disease. Dr. Jonathan Whiteson, a Cardio-Pulmonary Rehabilitation specialist at NYU Langone, has a workout prescription he calls FITT: frequency, intensity, type, and time.

- Frequency: 3-5 days of aerobic exercise and 2-3 times per week of resistance training. But of course, anything is better than nothing!
- Intensity: There are many equations to measure your ideal heart rate but keep it simple. Aim to be at a level in between comfortable breathing and gasping for air. You should be able to hold a conversation during your workout with a couple of breathing breaks in between. The more vigorous your exercise, the better.
- Type: Adding a variety of different workouts not only helps to minimize boredom but also strengthens ALL parts of the body. Dr. Whiteson recommends including aerobic exercise (like cardio), muscle toning (like resistance training), flexibility (like yoga), functional, and goal specific.
- Time: The current exercise recommendation for Americans is 120 minutes per week. But Dr. Whiteson points out, this is actually the recommended minimum. He suggests for maximum benefits to double it and aim for 300 minutes per week. That breaks down to one hour, five days a week.

### **Sleep Matters**

Studies show that less than 6 hours of sleep a night can increase your risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity by 50%. Sleep is important since it's the only way your body can "reset" itself, this influences the production of many hormones, specifically the hormones that regulate hunger. The recommendation is between 7-8 hours of sleep per night. Keep in mind you can't cheat and catch up on the weekends. Our bodies are unable to "catch-up" on sleep. Sleep benefits come from consistent nightly sleep. Creating a bed time ritual by eliminating screen time can help signal to the brain that sleep time is approaching and can induce the release of melatonin, a natural sleep aid hormone.

[Check out our nutrition page for more heart health strategies](#)

## **Related Blog Posts**



2.9.24 / Nutrition

## **National Heart Month: Strategies for Heart Health**

This National Heart Month, our Registered Dietitian Nutritionists offer tips for your heart health



1.31.24 / Nutrition

## **Plant-Based Diets and Cancer**

Eating mostly plant foods can help protect you from cancer and other diseases such as heart disease. A plant-forward diet can also result in benefits such as support for the immune system, maintenance, increased fiber intake,...



10.12.23 / Clients

## **Iconic New Yorkers Rosie Perez and Zoe Saldana Voice God's Love We Deliver PSA**

This is the first PSA in more than twenty years for God's Love, and aims to engage new clients, volunteers, and donors.