

# Functional Foods for Heart Health

Did you know that cardiovascular disease (CVD) has been the leading cause of death in the United States every year since 1918? Fortunately, exercise, stress management and healthy eating can reduce the chance of getting CVD.

Enhancing your diet with functional foods can also help. These foods have a potentially beneficial effect on health when eaten regularly at effective levels as part of a varied diet. Described below by Susan Kundrat, MS, RD, LD, a sports and wellness nutritionist and the owner of Nutrition on the Move in Urbana, Illinois, are some functional foods that can impact heart health.

## HEART BENEFITS OF TEA

Although much of the research on tea has focused on its role in cancer prevention, several studies have noted a lowered risk of heart disease or heart attack with increased consumption of tea.

Tea's beneficial effects on heart health may be due to several reasons. For example, tea slows LDL (the "bad" cholesterol) from oxidizing, an effect that may help protect the arteries from free-radical damage. Tea also decreases the stickiness of blood, reducing the risk of blood clots. While more research is needed to determine the exact mechanisms involved, consuming one to two cups of green or black tea daily may be a prudent way to boost heart health.

## 1. Oats and Psyllium

More than 40 human studies over a period of 30-plus years have documented the cholesterol-lowering benefits of oats. Instant oatmeal, rolled oats, oat bran and whole oat flour are all good sources. An effective daily intake is 3 grams (g) per day.

The seed husk of psyllium is another soluble fiber shown to be effective in lowering blood cholesterol levels. You may be familiar with the psyllium in Metamucil™. To lower cholesterol, you need to consume three servings of Metamucil per day (one serving contains 3.4 g of seed husk) to reach the effective daily intake of 10.2 g of husk. You can also buy the husk in bulk from natural food stores and use it as a powder in juice, smoothies or cooked cereals.

## 2. Soy

After reviewing a total of 43 studies, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) concluded that an average daily intake of 17 to 31 g of soy protein significantly lowers both total and LDL cholesterol. Based on these findings, the FDA determined that the effective daily intake is 25 g of soy protein a day.

Add soy to your diet gradually, to prevent indigestion, gas and bloating. Start with one serving daily and work up to two to three servings to reach 25 g. Soy protein is found naturally in soy milk, tofu, tempeh, roasted soy nuts and miso. You can also find it in many processed and fortified foods, energy bars and drinks.

## 3. Flaxseed

While much of the research on flaxseed has focused on its use for cancer preven-

tion, studies are now looking at its role in CVD protection. Research indicates that the fiber in flaxseed may combine with essential fatty acids to promote heart health.

Because flaxseed is high in fiber, it has a laxative effect and should be added to the diet gradually. Start with approximately 1 to 2 teaspoons of ground flax meal per day and work up to 2 tablespoons (1 tablespoon equals approximately 8 g). Effective daily intake is 15 to 50 g per day. The best way to enhance freshness and potency is to buy whole seeds and grind them in a coffee grinder (but not the one you use for coffee beans!). If you use preground seeds, refrigerate them in a tightly sealed container. Ground flaxseeds can be added to baking mixtures or smoothies, sprinkled on cereal or mixed with peanut butter or soy nut butter to make a spread.

Other heart-healthy functional foods include nuts, purple grapes, fatty fish and cholesterol-lowering margarines. For more information, see the University of Illinois Functional Foods for Health Program at [www.ag.uiuc.edu/ffh](http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/ffh). ♦

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