

Cardiac Superfoods

Heart protection begins in the kitchen.



By Brittany Anas

As it is with most chronic conditions, your fork is your best defense against heart attacks, strokes and other forms of cardiovascular disease. But while a basic produce-heavy, clean-protein diet is a must, some foods really shine when it comes to heart health.

Avocados

Research has shown avocados are a powerhouse when it comes to cardiovascular health, says Tieraona Low Dog, MD, chief medical officer of the spa chain Well & Being, which operates in three states, and director for the first Interprofessional Fellowship in Integrative Health and Medicine in California.

Avocados can significantly lower levels of total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol and triglycerides, which are a type of fat in your blood that can increase your chances of developing heart disease, Low Dog explains. (A quick primer: LDL cholesterol is considered the “bad” type because it contributes to the development of plaque, a buildup in artery walls that can put you at a higher risk for heart attacks and stroke.)

“Avocados contain more than twice the amount of potassium than bananas, are low in sodium, high in fiber and extremely low in sugar, all of which makes them an incredibly healthy addition to the diet,” Low Dog says, noting that avocados are the only fruit that contain a significant amount of heart-healthy mono-unsaturated fats. On top of that, the fats in avocados help the body absorb other key nutrients.

If you’re looking for ways to incorporate more avocados into your diet, take a lead from Low Dog and add them to smoothies, spread them on toasted whole grain bread instead of butter, or slice one open and add a little lemon.

“While many fruits and vegetables should be purchased organic, it isn’t really necessary for avocados, as the thick outer skin protects the inner flesh from pesticide residues,” Low Dog adds.

Berries

Berry patches are nature’s healthy equivalent of a candy bowl: It doesn’t matter whether you prefer strawberries, blueberries, raspberries or blackberries.

“Berries are all packed with anthocyanins, which have antioxidant properties that may decrease the risk of heart disease,” says Keri Gans, MS, RDN, registered dietitian/nutritionist and author of *The Small Change Diet* (Gallery Books). “They are also a good source of fiber, which is known to help decrease cholesterol levels.”

Numerous studies highlight the health benefits of berries. The anthocyanins in blueberries, for example, protect against hypertension, or high blood pressure, according to a study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. And eating three or more servings of blueberries and strawberries per week

may help women slash their risk of heart attack by as much as one third, according to another study published in *Circulation*.

Berries are easy snacks, Gans says, but they are also an excellent addition to smoothies, plain yogurt and hot or cold cereal. Her quick tip: “You can even spread them on peanut butter as your ‘jelly’ for a PB&J sandwich.”

Broccoli

When it comes to greens, broccoli takes the crown for being among the most heart-healthy. That’s because broccoli contains especially rich amounts of sulforaphane, a compound that can essentially switch on a protein to prevent plaque from clogging up arteries, according to a study in the *Journal of Arteriosclerosis, Thrombosis, and Vascular Biology*. (While the highest levels of sulforaphane are in broccoli, it’s also found in other cruciferous veggies like cabbage, kale, cauliflower, bok choy and Brussels sprouts.)

Cardiovascular protection is only one of broccoli’s many health benefits. It has also been linked to improvements in the body’s ability to detoxify itself as well as reductions in cancer risk.

Aside from its usual placement as a dinner side, broccoli can be added into a breakfast frittata along with heart-healthy tomatoes. It’s also delicious when tossed with pine nuts, olive oil and whole-wheat pasta. And broccoli sprouts, which are easy to grow at home, contain even more sulforaphane than the adult plants.

Dark Chocolate

If you’re craving a sugary treat, snub the cookies and candies. Instead, opt for dark chocolate, which is a treat for your heart, too.

“Regular consumption of dark chocolate helps enhance blood flow, which is important for heart health, reduces the risk of stroke and even helps maintain healthy blood sugar levels,” Low Dog says.

Dark chocolate also helps restore flexibility to your arteries and keeps white blood cells from sticking to the walls of vessels, according to a 2014 study in

the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology Journal. Arterial stiffness and white blood cell adhesion are both factors that can play a role in atherosclerosis, a hardening of the arteries as a result of plaque buildup.

A half ounce is a good portion size, and look for a fair trade chocolate with at least 70% cocoa, Low Dog suggests. “But don’t overdo it!” she cautions. “One ounce of dark chocolate has roughly 155 to 170 calories.”

Edamame

A staple at sushi restaurants, this green soybean is a great go-to snack that can promote heart health. “I love having a bag of frozen, shelled edamame ready to go in my freezer,” says Christy Brissette, MS, RD, founder of 80 Twenty Nutrition. “That way I can boil it for a couple of minutes and then I have a quick and healthy protein.”

Beyond its potential to quell a snack attack, edamame and other soyfoods are rich in isoflavones, which are phytonutrients that can boost functioning of your arteries and veins, says Brissette. (To learn about soy’s use in protein powders, see the box below.)

“Replacing some animal protein, especially red meat, in your diet with plant protein source such as edamame is linked to better health and even a longer life,” Brissette says. “This could be because you’re getting more fiber, which can help lower LDL cholesterol levels and help manage your weight to lower heart disease risk.”

Soy and Friends

In addition to edamame and other traditional soyfoods, the soybean has been put to use in supplemental protein powders. One reason these shake ingredients are so popular is that it allows you to get a concentrated dose of heart-friendly protein. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which is notoriously strict in allowing claims, allows the following heart-health statement: “25g of soy protein a day, as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, may reduce the risk of heart disease.”

To optimize soy’s cardioprotective benefits, find a reputable source—low-quality products can lose soy’s valuable nutrients during processing. The most advanced soy-based powder formulations use

both soy protein isolate and powdered fermented soy—the type that helps give Asian cuisines their healthy reputation—blended with protein powders taken from sprouted brown rice and peas.

Brissette suggests adding edamame to salads or a stir-fry, or roasting it to have around as a crunchy snack. It's also delicious when it's pureed with some olive oil and lemon juice to make an edamame hummus.

If you're ordering edamame at a restaurant, though, ask that they hold the salt. Then, you can sprinkle some on sparingly for yourself if you'd like to help limit your sodium intake.

Tomatoes

You may have found yourself debating over whether tomatoes are a fruit or a vegetable. (The US Supreme Court in *Nix v. Hedden* decided they are veggies under customs regulations, but from a botanical definition, tomatoes fall in the fruit category). One fact is far less controversial, however:

Tomatoes are definitely heart-healthy, thanks in large part to lycopene, says Brissette.

Lycopene, an antioxidant phytonutrient that gives tomatoes their red hue, can help reduce inflammation and lower LDL cholesterol levels, she explains.

“Research suggests that eating lycopene-rich foods regularly is linked to a lower risk of heart disease,” says Brissette, who adds that when it comes to food sources, tomatoes are the richest source of lycopene. They also perform a nutrition magic trick of sorts by becoming healthier when you cook them.

“Cooked tomatoes contain up to 2.5 times as much lycopene as raw tomatoes,” Brissette notes.

To get more tomatoes in your diet, try adding a tomato paste to your vegetable or chicken stock for extra flavor, Brissette suggests. In addition, crushed tomatoes are a delicious topping on your homemade pizza or as a sauce on your favorite pasta or quinoa.

“Buy jars of pureed tomatoes instead of tomato sauce,” Brissette advises. “Most tomato sauce has plenty of sugar and salt added to it that you don't need for a yummy sauce. Just add your own herbs to your pureed tomatoes and you'll have a heart-healthy sauce.”

Walnuts

Mother Nature might be dropping some hints: When you crack open a walnut, it resembles a heart—and the nut just so happens to be a boon for your cardiac health.

“Walnuts are rich in vitamin E, an antioxidant that may help prevent the buildup of plaque in the arteries, lowering the risk of coronary artery disease and heart attacks,” Brissette says.

On top of that, walnuts are a great source for omega-3 fatty acids, which help ease inflammation, and just 1/4 cup fulfills most people’s daily need for the fatty acid, according to Brissette.

“Get more walnuts in your day by adding them to your oatmeal, trail mix, yogurt and salads,” she suggests. “They’re also delicious in your healthy baked goods and a substitute for pine nuts in homemade pesto.”

Buying raw, unsalted walnuts will garner you the most heart health benefits, Brissette says. She explains that “raw walnuts will have more vitamin E than roasted because the nutrient is sensitive to heat.” Plus, cutting back on sodium (ahem, salted nuts) is another way to love your heart by helping to control blood pressure, she says.