

How is Your Heart?

I hope that you pledged last month with **Courage, Hope, Compassion and Love** to follow Public Health guidance regarding Covid-19 in order to help prevent the spread of this destructive disease. (See my January 2021 Newsletter article) As I write, we are in the midst of not knowing when we will be notified that we can get the vaccine and knowing that the virus continues to mutate and spread at a rapid pace. This and other stress producing events have challenged our ability to cope!

But --- once again it is the "Month of Hearts!" - designated as such because Valentine's Day is all about celebrating love. Perhaps celebrating Valentine's Day and love will give us a breather from so much stress. I am especially fond of Valentine's Day after many years as an elementary school nurse and having my "heart touched" as I watched children proudly arriving at school with their decorated valentine boxes with cards, candy hearts and chocolate to be distributed to classmates, teachers and staff.

Because I have always been extremely interested in the function of the human heart, I must confess that when February nears, I think a lot about my heart health. At the start of the pandemic in March, it became apparent that we might have to find different options for caring for our heart health, i.e., exercise, stress management and basic nutrition. The nutrition part of loving and caring for our health is often the most difficult part of a heart healthy lifestyle, and making the right choice of foods can be a daunting task. Eating healthy is especially vital at this time as we know that obesity, heart disease and diabetes increase the risk of COVID-19 complications. While recently searching for recipes on the web, I found multiple lists of foods that have been identified as being the most heart healthy. I have included ten foods that are easy to access and some of my favorite heart healthy foods.

1. Apples provide antioxidants and soluble fiber that helps to lower LDL cholesterol. One study found that frequent apple eaters had the lowest risk of suffering strokes when compared to non-apple eaters.

2. Beans are good for your heart because they contain soluble fiber that bind cholesterol and keep it from being absorbed in the gut. Beans also contain a variety of heart protecting chemicals, including flavonoids that inhibit the adhesion of platelets in the blood and serve to prevent heart attacks and strokes.

3. Berries are rich in polyphenols which increase the level of nitric oxide in the body, causing blood vessels to relax and blood pressure to be lowered. One study in Finland found that when participants ate close to one cup of mixed berries a day for eight weeks, they experienced an increase in HDL "good" cholesterol and a decrease in blood pressure. Berries used in the study included strawberries, red raspberries, bilberries (much like our blueberries), black currents, lingonberries and chokeberries.

4. Fish, especially the oily variety like salmon and tuna, is full of Omega-3 fat, which lowers blood levels of triglycerides, in turn lowering blood pressure and may even help to prevent irregular heart rhythms.

5. Nuts are full of vitamins, minerals, heart-healthy monounsaturated fats and low levels of saturated fats. Nuts contain between 150 and 185 calories per one ounce, making these little gems counterproductive if you eat too many of them.

6. Oatmeal is full of fiber called beta-glucan that lowers LDL (bad) cholesterol. Steel cut oats is an excellent choice and is easy to cook. Oatmeal can help to fight snack attacks and keep blood sugar levels stable. You can even swap 1/3 cup of oat flour for wheat flour when baking to add more fiber.

7. Tea, especially green tea, could almost be identified as a wonder drug. Once again, it is the antioxidants in green tea that provide protection for the gums, which in turn provides protection for the heart. One study found that individuals who drank 12 ounces or more of tea a day were half as likely to have a heart attack as non-tea drinkers.

8. Tomatoes can be used in many ways in food preparation, and the good news is that because they are full of lycopene, an antioxidant, their nutrient value is not destroyed in cooking. Tomatoes are also an excellent source of vitamin C, vitamin A, fiber, and potassium, all combining to provide heart protection.

9. Yogurt, a probiotic, may provide protection against gum disease by countering the effect of "bad" bacteria. One study showed that of 1000 adults those who consumed the highest level of dairy products, especially yogurt, had the healthiest gums.

10. Chocolate! Of course, on Valentine's Day, chocolate is the most important food to appease our hearts. As long as it is the dark variety in moderate amounts, it provides several reasons to indulge often. Chocolate has a blood-thinning effect, may boost the immune system by reducing inflammation, and boosts nitric oxide, which helps to keep blood pressure from climbing.

As you choose **love** during this "Month of Hearts!" may you remember to love those who are experiencing food insecurity! Your donations to St. Paul's Breakfast, Grace Works, Inspiritus or Lutheran World Relief will help the hearts of those in need both locally and globally.

It is not too late to get a flu shot! Be Well! Be Safe!

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References: Eat Healthier – Even During a Pandemic, Consumer Report, February 2021, pages 42 – 50. Herr, Laurie, Our Top 15 Heart Healthy Foods, EatingWell, November 30, 2018, www.eatingwell.com Lemire, Sarah and Van Hare, Holly, Heart Healthy Foods to Add to Your Diet, The Daily Meal, All Things Food and Drink, February 5, 2020, thedailymeal.com. 25 Top Heart Health Foods. WebMD, <https://webmd.com/food>

