Facts
You are what you eat
How a Healthy Diet Can Reduce Your Risk of Heart Disease and Stroke

Overview
Researchers are increasingly finding that there is a lot of truth to that old adage, “You are what you eat.” Along with regular exercise, weight management, and not smoking, a healthy diet is shown to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD), stroke and other chronic diseases and conditions. In fact, following healthy dietary guidelines – such as those recommended by the American Heart Association – is one of the best, easiest, and smartest ways for individuals to take control of their heart health. And even small changes can bring long-term benefits. That’s the good news.

The bad news is that too many Americans are still eating too many foods high in saturated and trans fats, cholesterol, added sugars, salt, and refined grains. Americans, especially children, are eating more food away from home, where the portion sizes are larger and the calorie amount is higher. The childhood obesity epidemic points to the need to educate kids about making better food choices at a young age.

For many Americans struggling to make ends meet, affordable and healthy foods are out of their reach. Access is a problem for those living in low-income urban, rural, and suburban areas where supermarkets have closed, and in food desert communities that are far from larger stores offering affordable fruits and vegetables.

The many benefits and challenges presented by a heart-healthy diet are clear. The association supports policy and regulatory efforts at the federal, state, and local levels to promote greater awareness of the importance of a healthy diet and to provide all Americans with greater access to nutritious foods.

What should we be eating?
Diet can be a powerful weapon in the war against CVD, and even a pattern of small changes can bring big health rewards. The association’s Diet and Lifestyle Recommendations promote the following comprehensive steps to focus on long-term, permanent changes in both how we eat and live and offer the greatest potential for reducing the risk of CVD in the general public:

- Balance calorie intake and physical activity to achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.
- Consume a diet rich in vegetables and fruits.
- Choose whole grain, high-fiber foods.
- Consume fish, especially oily fish, at least twice a week.
- Limit your intake of saturated fat to <7% of energy, trans fat to <1% of energy, and cholesterol to <300 mg per day. Choose lean meats and vegetable alternatives, fat-free or low-fat (1% fat) dairy products, and minimize intake of partially hydrogenated fats.
- Minimize your intake of beverages and foods with added sugars.
- Choose and prepare foods with little salt.
- If you consume alcohol, do so in moderation.
- Use the Nutrition Facts Label and ingredients list when buying foods.

Access to nutritious foods
There are a number of obstacles to getting more Americans to change their dietary habits. Those residing in certain parts of the U.S. with limited access to affordable and healthy foods are said to be living in a food desert. These individuals often face lengthy trips to supermarkets and shopping centers and at the same time are often surrounded by fast food outlets and convenience stores with less healthy choices. The figure below identifies the U.S. population with low
access to a grocery store. The darkest red indicates areas where >10,000 people do not have sufficient access to a store.

Figure 1 - Population with Low Access to a Grocery Store, 2010.

A report released in 2010 provided an in-depth review of 20 years of research on food access. The detailed information in this study highlighted the relationship between low-income consumer access to retail grocery stores and poor dietary intake. Even without the hardship of living in a food desert, most Americans lack dietary habits that are important to heart health. Among the seven metrics used to measure factors that will improve the nation’s heart health, adherence to a healthy diet is showing the least improvement. Children tend to have more ideal levels of health in each of the metrics compared to adults, except when it comes to a healthy diet. Presently, no adults or children are meeting this metric. In fact, the vast majority of Americans – 91.5% of children and 79% of adults – rank in the poor category when it comes to a healthy diet. These abysmal results mean there is significant room for improvement.

In addition to the rising cost of basic food items that all Americans are facing, individuals living in rural food deserts are paying even higher costs, especially for healthy foods. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables can protect against CVD, but the higher cost of these foods can make it prohibitive for low-income families. In 2009, among U.S. adults living in the greatest poverty (defined as <130% of the federal poverty line), only 32% consumed the daily recommended serving of fruit (≥ 2 fruits daily), and just 21.3% meet recommended daily vegetable intake levels (≥ 3 vegetables).

Public health strategies around nutrition and diet should therefore take into consideration such broad socioeconomic issues as growing disparities in income and wealth and the declining buying power of the minimum wage. Neighborhood differences in access to healthy food is a rising concern because of their potential to profoundly affect the quality of the diet. Transportation challenges in many lower-income neighborhoods are an additional factor which can affect a person’s ability to make the healthy food choice the easier choice.

THE ASSOCIATION ADVOCATES NUTRITION POLICIES

The American Heart Association advocates for policies that will: (1) raise public awareness about the importance of a healthy, balanced diet and lifestyle; and (2) increase the availability and use of fruits, vegetables, and other nutritious foods, particularly in our nation’s schools and in local communities. Policy recommendations include:

- Work to eliminate food deserts and improve access and affordability of healthy foods.
- Strengthen nutrition standards in schools for meals and competitive foods and in all government nutrition assistance or feeding programs.
- Work for strong nutrition programs in agriculture legislation.
- Require calorie information to be displayed on menus and menu boards in all restaurants with standardized menus and recipes, as well as venues that serve food for immediate consumption.
- Continue to monitor the removal of industrially-produced trans fats from the food supply and assure the use of healthy replacement oils.
- Eliminate food marketing and advertising of unhealthy foods to children.
- Limit added sugar and sodium in the food supply.
- Address revisions to the Nutrition Facts Label on packaged foods and promote a unified front-of-package food labeling system based on standardized nutrition criteria.

10 Blanchard, T., Mississippi State University Study on retail concentration, food deserts, and food disadvantaged communities in rural America, 2008.