



# Your Partner in Wellness

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## At the Heart of the Matter

By Desiree Nielsen, RD, the Choices Dietitian

Your heart does a lot for you. Its muscular contractions transport blood a whopping 19,000 km every day! To move that blood, your heart will beat 100,000 times per day without too much fuss. With all your heart does for you, when was the last time you did something in appreciation of your ticker? Being that February is heart month, what better time to acknowledge your heart and make positive changes to your life that will contribute to a healthy cardiovascular system?

In order for your heart to stay strong over time, it requires upkeep and wise, healthy lifestyle choices. Eating well and exercising go a long way towards keeping our hearts healthy. Over the last decade, incidence of heart disease has decreased by 25%. Even though numbers have decreased, heart disease still accounts for more than a third of all deaths in Canada.

It is important to know your risk. While most men consider heart disease a leading health concern, many women are still unaware that they are more likely to die of heart disease than any other condition. The good news is that risk factors for heart disease are well known, and with minimal effort, we can all lower our risks dramatically. In recent years, the population has decreased its intake of salt and saturated fat, which helps to keep the heart ticking. Now, research has linked inflammation with heart disease, arming us with even more information on how to better care for our hardworking hearts for years to come.

Inflammation is a normal immune response to injury in our body tissues. However, just like chronic stress, chronic inflammation wreaks havoc in the body if it goes unchecked.

Concerning arterial plaque formation, inflammation acts as a major culprit. When the lining of the arteries becomes inflamed, only then can immune cells begin to bind. When these immune cells called leukocytes bind, they prime the artery for plaque formation and unleash an inflammatory cascade of events. Once the plaque has formed, inflammation can also contribute directly to plaque rupture and total blockage of the artery, leading to heart attack.

Looking at your diet is one essential component in the war on inflammation. An anti-inflammatory diet consists of a variety of whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins. As you grow more accustomed to cooking with and eating whole foods, you'll start to notice the positive effects it has on not only your heart but also your whole body.

One way of curbing inflammation is by achieving and maintaining a healthy body weight—whole foods are critical in this process. Excess weight, especially around the middle, triggers an increase of inflammatory messengers and promotes systemic inflammation.




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Abdominal fat is not just a passive storage site. It is an active metabolic tissue that sends signals, in this case inflammatory messengers, throughout the body. Whole foods pack plenty of nutrition into a low calorie package, helping you to feel full and satisfied on fewer calories, which is important for weight loss.

Keeping blood sugars stable is another important factor in reducing inflammation. Whole food sources of carbohydrates—vegetables, fruit, whole grains and beans—release their carbohydrates into the bloodstream more slowly than processed foods like crackers, pastries and other baked goods. Finding ways to sneak in healthier carbohydrates is simple: choose steel cut oats over processed cereals; whole wheat pasta over white; sprouted grain breads over flour-based breads; whole intact grains like quinoa and buckwheat as side dishes. These foods also contain fibre, B vitamins and plenty of antioxidants to further protect your heart.

Whole foods are also your best source of heart-healthy fats. Healthy choices include seafood as well as nuts, seeds, avocados and any of their oils. Most processed foods and many oils promote inflammation. Omega-6 fats from oils like soy, sunflower and corn oil strongly promote inflammation in the body and should make a rare appearance in your diet. Omega

3 fats from fish, flax, pumpkin seeds, walnuts and canola are very anti-inflammatory, but we often don't eat enough of these foods. By eating a small amount of raw nuts and seeds each day and taking fish oils, we help soothe the fires of inflammation in the body. Choosing leaner proteins like beans, fish and poultry also help to reduce your intake of inflammation-promoting and cholesterol-increasing saturated fats. For everyday use, extra virgin olive oil is an excellent choice as its primary fatty acid, oleic acid, is strongly anti-inflammatory.

Heart disease affects many Canadians but we are armed with the knowledge to make it history. February is heart month, so why not celebrate by following the principals of the anti-inflammatory diet? Do some good for your heart and it will surely return the favour. 

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