

Heart-Healthy Eating

Nourishing choices to support cholesterol, blood pressure, blood vessels and long-term cardiovascular health

Heart-healthy eating is a pattern, not a perfection test. It generally emphasises vegetables, fruit, wholegrains, pulses, fish where eaten, nuts and seeds where safe, and unsaturated fats, while keeping saturated fat, excess salt and highly processed foods in perspective. Food works alongside movement, sleep, medication, smoking cessation and appropriate medical care.

What heart-healthy eating can support

A balanced dietary pattern can help manage blood cholesterol, blood pressure, weight and blood glucose, all of which can influence cardiovascular risk. Genetics, age and existing health conditions also matter.

Build around these foods

Food group	Examples
Vegetables and fruit	Fresh, frozen or tinned varieties; aim for realistic variety.
Wholegrains and pulses	Oats, wholegrain bread, brown rice, beans, lentils and chickpeas.
Protein	Fish, poultry, eggs, pulses, tofu and leaner meats.
Unsaturated fats	Olive/rapeseed oils, avocado, nuts and seeds where safe.
Calcium-rich foods	Lower-fat dairy or suitable fortified alternatives according to need.

The overall pattern matters

No single food prevents heart disease. Regular everyday choices matter more than an occasional meal, and favourite foods can still have a place.

Fats, Cholesterol & Omega-3

Saturated fat

Saturated fat is found in foods such as butter, ghee, fatty and processed meats, cream, some cheeses, coconut and palm fats. Replacing some saturated fat with unsaturated fat can support healthier blood cholesterol.

Unsaturated fat

Olive and rapeseed oils, nuts, seeds, avocado and oily fish provide unsaturated fats. These foods are energy-dense, but that does not make them unhealthy.

Omega-3

Oily fish supplies long-chain omega-3 fats. Plant sources such as walnuts, chia, flax/linseed and rapeseed oil provide ALA omega-3. People who do not eat fish may discuss algae-derived DHA/EPA with an appropriate professional if relevant.

Cholesterol in food

For most people, saturated fat has a greater influence on blood cholesterol than dietary cholesterol itself. Individual advice may differ for specific medical conditions.

Practical swaps

Instead of mainly	Try more often
Butter/ghee	Olive or rapeseed oil in suitable amounts
Fatty processed meat	Fish, poultry, beans, lentils, tofu or leaner meat
Cream-heavy sauces	Tomato-, vegetable- or yoghurt-based sauces
Frequent pastries/biscuits	Fruit, yoghurt, wholegrain snacks or nuts/seeds where safe
Large cheese portions	Smaller portions alongside other protein/calcium sources

Blood Pressure, Salt, Fibre & Wholegrains

Salt

Too much salt can contribute to high blood pressure in salt-sensitive people. Much of the salt in UK diets comes from packaged foods, bread, processed meats, sauces, takeaways and ready meals rather than only the salt shaker.

Labels

Comparing similar products can help identify lower-salt options. Taste buds can gradually adapt when salt is reduced, while herbs, spices and other flavourings can keep food enjoyable.

Fibre

Oats, barley, pulses, vegetables, fruit, nuts, seeds and wholegrains provide fibre. Soluble fibre from foods such as oats and pulses can contribute to cholesterol management.

Wholegrains

Wholegrain bread, oats, brown rice and other higher-fibre starches can support bowel and cardiovascular health. They do not need to replace every refined grain immediately.

Potassium

Fruit, vegetables, pulses and potatoes provide potassium, which is relevant to blood-pressure regulation. People with kidney disease may need individual potassium advice.

A balanced plate

Part	Examples
Vegetables	A generous portion in forms you tolerate.
Protein	Fish, poultry, pulses, tofu, eggs or another suitable source.
Carbohydrate	Wholegrain or higher-fibre starch where suitable.
Fat	A modest amount of unsaturated fat.
Flavour	Herbs, spices and lower-salt flavourings.

Meals, Shopping, Budget & Eating Out

Breakfast

Porridge with berries and seeds; wholegrain toast with eggs; yoghurt with oats and fruit; fortified cereal with milk or a suitable alternative.

Lunch

Lentil soup with wholegrain bread; chicken or bean salad; tuna jacket potato; hummus wrap; grain bowl with vegetables and protein.

Dinner

Fish with vegetables and potatoes; chicken with wholegrains and roasted vegetables; bean chilli; lentil bolognese; tofu stir-fry; vegetable and pulse curry.

Shopping basket

Cupboard/freezer	Fresh/chilled
Oats, wholegrains and pulses	Vegetables and fruit
Tinned fish/beans	Fish, poultry, tofu or eggs
Frozen vegetables/berries	Lower-fat dairy or fortified alternatives
Olive/rapeseed oil	Fresh herbs and salad vegetables
Unsalted nuts/seeds where safe	Convenient balanced meals where useful

Budget

Heart-healthy eating can be built from ordinary foods. Oats, beans, lentils, potatoes, frozen vegetables, tinned fish and seasonal produce can be economical.

Eating out

Grilled or baked dishes, vegetables, pulses and tomato-based sauces can be useful choices, but one restaurant meal does not determine cardiovascular health. Enjoyment and social connection matter too.

Individual Needs: ARFID, Allergies & Medical Conditions

ARFID and sensory needs

Standard advice to swap brands, textures or cooking methods may be unrealistic when safe foods are limited. Start with accepted foods and make changes gently. Adequate intake remains essential.

Autism and predictability

Consistency can support eating. A nutritionally 'better' product is not helpful if the change in taste or texture means it cannot be eaten.

Food allergies and intolerances

Nuts, seeds, fish, dairy and soya are often recommended in heart-health advice but may be unsafe or intolerable for some people. Equivalent nutrients can be obtained in other ways with appropriate planning.

Diabetes

Heart health and diabetes care overlap substantially. Fibre-rich carbohydrates, unsaturated fats, vegetables and appropriate protein can support both, while medication and individual glucose responses still need consideration.

Kidney disease

Kidney disease can change advice about potassium, protein, salt and fluids. Generic heart-healthy guidance should be adapted by the clinical team.

After a heart attack or stroke

Nutrition is one part of secondary prevention. Prescribed medication, cardiac rehabilitation, blood-pressure and cholesterol management, physical activity and follow-up care remain important.

Eating disorders

Heart-health messaging should not become rigid food rules. Fear of fat, compulsive label checking or eliminating favourite foods can damage nutritional and psychological wellbeing.

A heart-supportive diet should protect health without making eating frightening, joyless or impossible.

Myths, Personal Check-In & Sources

Common myths

“All fat is bad for the heart.” Unsaturated fats can be beneficial. **“Eggs must always be avoided.”** For most people, overall saturated-fat intake matters more. **“Heart-healthy food has to be bland.”** Herbs, spices and varied cooking methods can add flavour. **“Only expensive superfoods protect the heart.”** Ordinary foods such as oats, beans and vegetables are valuable. **“One unhealthy meal damages everything.”** Long-term patterns matter.

Personal check-in

- Am I eating a variety of vegetables, fruit and fibre-rich foods that I tolerate?
- Could I replace some saturated fats with unsaturated fats?
- Do I include a regular protein source at meals?
- Could I reduce some high-salt foods without making eating overly restrictive?
- Do I have enough omega-3 from fish or appropriate alternatives?
- Are my choices realistic for my budget and sensory needs?
- Do diabetes, kidney disease or medication change the advice I need?
- Am I using heart-health information to support myself rather than create fear?
- Would my GP, cardiac team or dietitian help me personalise my plan?

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Looking after your heart does not require a perfect diet. Small, repeatable changes can matter: adding fibre, choosing unsaturated fats more often, reducing excess salt and building meals around foods you genuinely enjoy and can manage. Your heart health is bigger than any single plate.

Evidence and further reading

NHS: healthy eating, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and cardiovascular health guidance.

British Heart Foundation: evidence-based information on fats, salt, fibre, Mediterranean-style eating and heart health.

NICE: clinical guidance on cardiovascular risk assessment, lipid modification and secondary prevention.

British Dietetic Association: evidence-based dietary information on heart health and balanced eating

Educational information only. This guide does not replace individual advice from your GP, cardiac team, pharmacist or registered dietitian.