

Herbs & Foods for Heart Health

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Nutrients and foods for the heart and blood vessels:

Vitamin C and bioflavonoids are a related group of nutrients and phytochemicals (also called phytonutrients) that are both anti-oxidant and anti-inflammatory. Oxidation involves the ‘stealing’ of electrons, and when it happens in our tissues it can lead to damage, and when it happens to fats it causes them to become rancid. Chronic inflammation leads to tissue changes and damage due to the effects of continued presence of inflammatory chemicals. All are implicated in vascular disease, in which the body patches up damage in our arteries with plaques. If the fats in the plaques are rancid, it’s even more unhealthy.

Vitamin C also assists with collagen formation, the structural ‘rebar’ that helps hold us together. With plenty of vitamin C and bioflavonoids, we can build many cross-linking collagen fibers to give our tissues strength and resilience. Vitamin C deficiency leads to structural weakness, making us more vulnerable to injury and impairing our ability to heal. Even our blood vessels are affected, and this can be part of the genesis of cardiovascular disease.

Vitamin C is found in all fruits and vegetables, and bioflavonoids (also called flavonoids or OPCs) are most abundant in purple, red or blue berries, and also found in other fruits and vegetables with these colors. Examples include blueberries, blackberries, red peppers, black plums, purple grapes and red wine, red cabbage, blue potatoes, raspberries, rosehips, etc.

The B vitamins are being studied for their role in promoting cardiovascular health. Many B’s help with amino acid conversions, including the conversion of homocysteine to methionine. High homocysteine levels are associated with higher risk of cardiovascular disease, so converting it to methionine is important to protect the CV system. B3 helps lower LDL levels. Vitamin B6 also contributes to well-functioning blood vessels by helping maintain their elasticity and by helping maintain magnesium levels in the body. We need several B vitamins like folate and B12 to make the red blood cells that bring oxygen to our cells. Examples of foods high in B vitamins include: nutritional yeast, legumes, whole grains, liver, nuts and seeds, greens and fish.

Magnesium is an essential mineral in our diets that promotes relaxation of muscles, including the smooth muscles of the blood vessels. When our blood vessels are relaxed our pressure goes down. Magnesium also keeps calcium from settling into soft tissues such as arteries and hardening them, and supports normal heart rhythm. Foods rich in magnesium include: seeds, peanuts, nuts, legumes, dark green leafies and avocado.

Fiber-rich foods like vegetables, legumes, whole grains and fruit help keep cholesterol levels normal by improving cholesterol excretion from the GI tract. Fiber also plays a role in our immunity by supporting the gut flora and calming inflammation generally.

Fats are a huge area of concern and controversy with respect to cardiovascular disease. We need a certain amount of fat in our diets to maintain our cell membranes, skin, hormones and brain function, but too much fat or most importantly poor quality fats are damaging. Our understanding of the role of cholesterol has evolved quite a bit, from an overall cholesterol level over 200 being considered a risk, to further detail involving HDL and LDL levels and their risks. Currently doctors are looking for higher HDL levels and low LDL and triglyceride levels.

Poor quality fats are the most damaging to our tissues and raise our LDL levels. These include margarines, shortenings (until recently mostly made of trans-fats but still highly processed fats), fried foods, hydrogenated fats, homogenized whole milk, and fatty foods that are products of industrial agriculture, like eggs and beef. Fried foods include everything from French fries to chips, anything cooked in hot vegetable oil.

Good quality fats, in reasonable moderation, increase HDL levels and promote resilience and stability in our cell membranes and nervous systems. These include fish, raw cold pressed vegetable oils like olive, sesame and flax, animal products from 100% grass fed/pastured animals, raw nuts and seeds like walnuts, sunflower seeds, Brazil nuts, etc. The proportions of fatty acids in these foods tend to reduce LDLs and inflammation. Cooked gently to preserve the quality of fat, even egg yolks and beef (pastured) are healthy and don't promote cardiovascular disease in moderation. Dairy fat and egg yolks are also excellent sources of vitamins A and D.

Other foods that help:

Whole grains, nuts and seeds are rich in Vitamin E, and Brazil nuts are especially rich in selenium, both of which are important antioxidants that help protect the blood vessels from free radical damage and also prevent fats from being oxidized.

Vegetables like onions and garlic are also great antioxidants and reduce blood viscosity.

Four stalks of celery per day can reduce blood pressure!

Herbs for the heart:

Hawthorn (*Crataegus* spp.) is the best-known and safest heart tonic. It improves nutrition to the heart muscle and literally strengthens and improves efficiency of the heart. Used for everything from prevention of cardiovascular disease to recovery from heart attack or stroke, hawthorn is wonderful food for the heart. Hawthorn can also help with the emotional aspects of the heart—it is mildly anti-depressant and can be healing to broken hearts and other emotional upsets. The nutrients in hawthorn are related to the bioflavonoids, and are known as flavonoids or OPCs. This herb is also beneficial to the blood vessels. Hawthorn may potentiate beta blockers used as hypotensive medication, so any concurrent use of herbs and medications should be reviewed by a clinical herbalist. Tea, tincture, jam or other concentrate of hawthorn berries are all useful ways to take hawthorn. The leaves and flowers of hawthorn make a somewhat milder but delicious tea.

Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*) has been used to support normal blood pressure and rhythm for ages. It's especially useful for hypertension and heart palpitations from stress, anxiety, hyperthyroid function or perimenopause. Since it's rather bitter, a tincture of motherwort is often the most useful way to take it.

Garlic bulb (*Allium sativum*) used long-term as part of our diet can inhibit atherosclerosis, modestly lower cholesterol levels and prevent hardening of the vessels. It reduces blood viscosity somewhat and is a great antioxidant. Including a few cloves per day in food is the best way to use it, but it can also be taken in capsules.

Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*) helps lower triglycerides, lower LDL cholesterol and lower blood pressure. Spices also improve blood circulation with their stimulating nature. Cinnamon also lowers blood sugar, which helps prevent cardiovascular disease by reducing sugar's damaging effects on the blood vessels. We can use it in food, tea, tincture or capsule.

Hibiscus flower (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) is antioxidant and anti-inflammatory and regular use also helps improve lipid balances. Hibiscus makes a delicious tea.

Green tea (*Camellia sinensis*) is also antioxidant, helps support the health of the blood vessels and inhibits atherosclerosis. Two to four cups of green tea daily is effective.

Linden flower (*Tilia* spp.) is a mildly hypotensive herb that makes an exceptionally delicious tea. It is also quite relaxing and helps with reducing stress.

Rose (*Rosa* spp.) has a long association with love and the heart. Especially pink or red roses are used for supporting our emotional heart through times of heartbreak and grief. Tea or elixir of rose can both be super helpful.

RECIPES:

Berry brandy cordial:

Any purple, blue or red berries can be used, wild or cultivated (blueberries, raspberries, hawthorn, elderberry, blackberries, etc). Chop up berries by hand or whiz them briefly in a food processor to break up their skins. Put them in a wide mouth glass jar large enough to fill about $\frac{3}{4}$ full of berries. Cover the berries with brandy, give it a good shake to mix well, cap and leave to steep for a few months. Strain out the berries, pressing them to extract all the liquid. Add honey or maple syrup to taste. This makes a delicious cordial that can be taken in small (one half to one ounce per day) quantities regularly as a tonic.

Heart mending tonic:

Chop up fresh hawthorn berries or whiz dried berries in a coffee grinder used only for herbs and spices. A good solid mortar and pestle may also work well, as the berries are rather hard. Put these ground hawthorn berries into a wide-mouth jar with an equal percentage of red roses from unsprayed sources. Cover the herbs with vodka or vegetable glycerine and let steep for at least 1 month. Strain out the herbs, pressing to extract all the liquid. Add honey to taste and mix well. The dose is $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 teaspoon taken as needed for grief or sadness.

Happy heart pesto:

Peel one head of garlic. In a food processor or blender, mince the garlic with a scant cup of fresh raw walnuts. Remove the stems from two or three bunches of greens – dandelion greens, arugula, parsley, basil, cilantro, spinach or other wild greens and add the greens to the processor. I like to use a combination. Add about a half cup of olive oil and process to a puree or paste. Depending on the greens and the consistency you like, you may need more olive oil. Spread on cucumber slices, whole-wheat crackers, celery sticks, lettuce or eggs. Pesto is a great way to get excellent fats, B vitamins and antioxidants.

Instead of a plain cheeseburger and fries, have a burger from grass-fed beef on a whole-wheat bun or toast with a big slab of roasted red pepper and some hot sauce, accompanied by a baked potato with pesto!

Enjoy!