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Nutrition Advice You Can Take to Heart

WebMD's top 5 vitamins and minerals for heart health

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WebMD Weight Loss Clinic - Feature

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Proper nutrition -- including a low fat, high [fiber](#) diet -- is considered so important to heart health that just about every set of guidelines touches on what you should eat, what you shouldn't eat, how you should eat it, and when you should eat it.

In fact, government guidelines for treating blood pressure, [cholesterol](#), and [obesity](#) -- three top risk factors for heart disease -- all emphasize diet as a means of getting your numbers where they belong.

"There is no question that nutrition is the single most important factor in the prevention of coronary artery disease," says Thomas Barringer, MD, the medical director of the Center for Cardiovascular Health at the Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte, N.C. "It definitely comes down to nutrition."

That's why WebMD put together a list of the top five vitamins and minerals you need for optimal heart health. Starting with:

Making More Magnesium Mandatory

Large studies have linked magnesium deficiency to [high blood pressure](#), while some have shown an association between magnesium supplements and a decreased risk of death from heart disease.

"Some researchers say that, as a nation, we could cut our rate of heart disease by one-half if we took more magnesium," says City Island, N.Y.-based Carolyn Dean, MD, ND, author of *The Miracle of Magnesium*. "Magnesium is the body's natural calcium channel blocker. It balances out the excess calcium that is associated with the heart going into muscle spasm, which equals a [heart attack](#)."

Dark, leafy green vegetables are rich in magnesium, and whole grains and nuts also are good sources.

"Cooked and processed foods also lose a lot of magnesium, making it a very

deficient mineral." That's why Dean suggests taking 300 mg two to three times a day of magnesium oxide, magnesium citrate, or magnesium glycinate. Magnesium supplements can interfere with the absorption of certain medications and may cause [diarrhea](#), so be sure to talk to your doctor first.

Data from the Nurses' Health Study and the Harvard School of Public Health back up Dean's claims. A higher intake of magnesium may reduce the risk of developing type 2 [diabetes](#). Research has shown that low levels of magnesium may impair insulin sensitivity or function. Consuming adequate levels of magnesium may help insulin function properly in the body, which may prevent type 2 diabetes.

The American Heart Association (AHA) lists diabetes as one of the six major risk factors for cardiovascular disease. In fact, adults with diabetes are two to four times more likely to have heart disease or a [stroke](#) than adults without diabetes.

Not Fooling With Folic Acid

Folic acid, a B vitamin, is important for heart health, experts agree. The amount of homocysteine in the blood, a marker for heart disease, is regulated by folic acid.

"High levels of homocysteine can lead to heart disease, and the way to combat high homocysteine is to take folic acid," says Michael Poon, MD, chief of cardiology at Cabrini Medical Center in New York. Aim for 1 milligram or 1,000 micrograms a day, he says.

Homocysteine may damage the blood vessel walls and promote blood clots, and although studies have consistently shown that high levels are associated with an increased risk of heart disease, researchers are still not sure whether lowering the level of homocysteine reduces heart disease risk.

But homocysteine levels are strongly influenced by diet, and several studies have shown that higher blood levels of B vitamins -- specifically folic acid -- are related, at least partly, to lower concentrations of homocysteine. Today, cereals, breads, and other grains like rice are fortified with extra folic acid. Fruits and vegetables like spinach, strawberries, oranges, and broccoli have high levels of folic acid.

"A lot of people think of calcium as for the bones, but it's also good for the heart."

But don't forget the other Bs, says Nancy Kennedy, MS, RD, a nutritionist at the Ministrelli Women's Heart Center at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak, Mich. Vitamins B-6 and B-12 are also important in lowering homocysteine. "Many clinicians emphasize folic acid, but actually all three B vitamins are involved in the metabolism of homocysteine, and B-6 is one of the vitamins that is typically very low in the American diet," she says. The American Dietetic Association (ADA) suggests 2 mg of B-6 and 6 micrograms of B-12. Beef liver, baked potatoes, watermelon, and banana are rich in B-6, while milk, meats (beef, pork, lamb, veal, fish, poultry), eggs, and cheese are replete with B-12.

Nixing Your Heart Risks With Niacin

Niacin (also known as vitamin B-3) helps increase HDL or "good" cholesterol levels. It comes in over-the-counter preparations and as dietary supplements. It's also found in dairy products, poultry, fish, lean meats, nuts, and eggs. Legumes and enriched breads and cereals may also contain some niacin. Poon recommends that people with low HDL levels take 500 mg of niacin each day, building up to 1,000 mg.

But, he cautions, this should be monitored by a doctor because each person is different. "It can have some side effects and is not for everybody, particularly people who already have high HDL levels," he tells WebMD. Flushing, itching, and [nausea and vomiting](#) can occur.

Pumping Up Your Potassium

Potassium helps regulate blood pressure levels, and high blood pressure, or hypertension, is a major risk factor for heart disease. Normal blood pressure is less than 120 systolic, the upper number in a blood pressure reading, and less than 80 diastolic pressure, the lower number in a blood pressure reading.

For adequate potassium, "I suggest five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables each day," says Kennedy. Potassium-rich foods include bananas, potatoes, peaches, and apricots. In fact, the National High Blood Pressure Education Program recommends that people who do not suffer from hypertension consume at least 3,500 mg of dietary potassium daily.

Kennedy prefers whole foods to supplements when it comes to potassium. "Fruits and vegetables are also high in fiber, and you also need fiber to lower cholesterol levels, which won't come from potassium supplements," she tells WebMD. One medium-sized baked potato with skin has 850 mg of potassium; 10 halves of dry apricots contain 407 mg; 1 cup of raisins has 1,099 mg, and one cup of winter squash has 896 mg.

Counting on Calcium

"A lot of people think of calcium as for the bones, but it's also good for the heart," Kennedy says. "It helps [weight management](#), which indirectly affects heart disease risk." It also helps regulate blood pressure along with magnesium and potassium.

"I recommend that everyone get two to three servings of calcium-rich food a day," she says. "You can eat almonds or broccoli, but it takes three cups of broccoli to get the calcium in one glass of milk, so I really push dairy or soy foods.

"For people who are lactose intolerant or don't like the taste of milk, I suggest including soy cheese and soy milk because they are rich in calcium and also help lower cholesterol," she says. One cup of milk has 290 to 300 mg of calcium, and 1 oz of Swiss cheese has 250 to 270 mg. Calcium-fortified soy foods stack up well against their dairy counterparts, she says.

SOURCES: Michael Poon, MD, chief of cardiology, Cabrini Medical Center, New York. Thomas Barringer, MD, medical director, Center for Cardiovascular Health,

Carolinas Medical Center, Charlotte, N.C. Carolyn Dean, MD, ND, author, *The Miracle of Magnesium*. Nancy Kennedy, MS, RD, nutritionist , Ministrelli Women's Heart Center, Beaumont Hospital, Royal Oak, Mich.

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