

Heart Health



John Core
Sodexo Culinary Nutrition Lead



Valentines Day is a time to celebrate love and the connections that make life meaningful. Our hearts are not just symbols on a Valentines Day card; they are the engines of our wellbeing, tirelessly supporting us every day. By making thoughtful choices about the foods we eat, we can nurture our hearts and keep them strong—not just for ourselves, but for the people we love. This Valentine's, embrace heart health ensuring we can share life's special moments for years to come.

Fats

Fats often get a bad reputation, but not all fats are the same, and understanding the difference is key to keeping your heart healthy. Fats are an essential part of your diet, providing energy, helping your body absorb vitamins, and supporting overall health. However, the type of fat you consume can make a big difference to your cardiovascular wellbeing.

Healthy fats, especially unsaturated fats, are the champions of a heart-friendly diet. These fats lower bad cholesterol (LDL), reduce inflammation, and boost overall heart health. Great sources include olive oil, a staple of the Mediterranean diet, rich in monounsaturated fats. Other excellent options are avocados, nuts like almonds and walnuts, and seeds such as flaxseeds and chia seeds. Fatty fish, like salmon, mackerel, and sardines, are packed with omega-3 fatty acids, which are particularly effective at reducing triglycerides and supporting a steady heart rhythm.

On the other hand, unhealthy fats – saturated and trans fats – pose risks to heart health. Saturated fats, found in processed meats, full-fat dairy, and some baked goods, can increase LDL cholesterol when consumed in excess. Trans fats, which are often hidden in processed foods, fried snacks, and margarine, are even more harmful. They not only raise bad cholesterol but also lower good cholesterol (HDL), significantly increasing the risk of heart disease.

Making the switch from unhealthy to healthy fats is a simple but impactful step toward better heart health. Try replacing butter or lard with olive or

rapeseed oil when cooking. Snack on nuts or avocado instead of processed crisps. Even small changes, like adding ground flaxseeds or chia seeds to recipes, can make a meaningful difference. These easy swaps can help keep your heart strong and healthy for the long term.

Fibre for Heart Health

Fibre is essential for a heart-healthy diet, playing a key role in lowering cholesterol and supporting cardiovascular wellbeing. Soluble fibre is particularly important as it dissolves in water to form a gel-like substance, which binds to cholesterol in the digestive system and reduces the amount absorbed into the bloodstream. This process helps lower cholesterol levels and, in turn, reduces the risk of heart disease.

Including foods rich in soluble fibre in your diet is a simple and effective way to protect your heart. Oats are a standout choice due to their high beta-glucan content, which has been widely studied for its cholesterol-lowering effects. Barley is another excellent source of soluble fibre and a versatile grain that works well in soups, salads, and stews. Legumes like lentils, chickpeas, and black beans not only provide soluble fibre but are also packed with protein, making them a heart-healthy and satisfying alternative to animal-based proteins.

Fresh fruits and vegetables also contribute significantly to soluble fibre intake. Apples, citrus fruits, carrots, and sweet potatoes are delicious options that can be easily included in meals to enhance heart health. Incorporating a variety of colourful vegetables ensures you get a steady supply of fibre and other heart-protective nutrients.

Whole grains such as whole wheat, quinoa, and brown rice are rich in fibre as well as antioxidants and phytochemicals that support heart health. Swapping refined grains like white bread or pasta for whole-grain options can significantly boost your fibre intake.

Fibre does more than just manage cholesterol. It also promotes satiety, helping you feel fuller for longer, which can support healthy weight management—a crucial factor in reducing the risk of heart disease.

To support heart health, aim for at least 30 grams of fibre per day, focusing on soluble fibre sources. Start your day with a bowl of porridge topped with fresh fruit, add legumes to lunchtime salads or soups, and choose whole-grain breads or crackers at dinner. By making fibre-rich foods a regular part of your diet, you'll not only

support your heart but improve your overall health.

Salt and Sodium Management

Salt often plays a hidden role in modern diets, significantly contributing to high blood pressure—a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. While sodium, a key component of salt, is essential for functions like nerve signalling and muscle contraction, consuming too much can have serious consequences for cardiovascular health.

Excess sodium causes the body to retain water, which increases blood volume and puts extra pressure on the heart and blood vessels. Over time, this can lead to high blood pressure (hypertension), raising the risk of heart attacks and other cardiovascular issues. Surprisingly, most of the sodium we consume doesn't come from the salt shaker but from processed foods, packaged meals, and restaurant dishes.

The good news is that reducing sodium intake can be straightforward with a few mindful adjustments. Cooking meals from scratch is one of the best ways to control salt levels, as it gives you full control over how much, if any, is added. Experiment with herbs, spices, and natural flavour enhancers like garlic, ginger, turmeric, lemon juice, or vinegar to add depth and complexity to your dishes without extra sodium. You might also consider pre-mixed seasoning blends that are specifically labelled as salt-free.



Another practical strategy is to read food labels carefully. Look for products marked 'low-sodium', 'reduced-sodium', or 'no salt added' and aim to keep your daily sodium intake within the recommended limit of around 2,300 mg for adults - or even lower, at 1,500 mg, for optimal heart health.

Choosing fresh or frozen produce over tinned alternatives is another effective way to cut back on sodium. If tinned goods are your only option, opt for low-sodium versions or rinse them thoroughly under running water to remove excess salt.

By reducing your reliance on salt and embracing other flavouring methods, you can prepare meals that are both delicious and heart-healthy.

Antioxidants and Anti-inflammatory Foods

Oxidative stress and chronic inflammation are major contributors to heart disease. They can damage blood vessels and lead to plaque build-up in the arteries, increasing the risk of cardiovascular problems. Fortunately, certain foods rich in antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds can help protect your heart by neutralising harmful free radicals and reducing inflammation.

Antioxidants, which are abundant in colourful fruits and vegetables, play a vital role in combating oxidative stress. Berries like blueberries, strawberries, and raspberries are especially rich in anthocyanins, a powerful

antioxidant that supports heart health. Leafy greens such as spinach and kale are packed with vitamins C and E, which help protect blood vessels from damage. Green tea is another excellent choice, offering catechins that are known to reduce inflammation and improve blood flow.

Anti-inflammatory foods work alongside antioxidants to fight chronic low-grade inflammation, a key factor in heart disease. Turmeric, with its active compound curcumin, is a standout option for reducing inflammation. Adding turmeric to soups, stews, or teas is an easy way to incorporate its benefits into your diet. Nuts like almonds and walnuts also provide heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin E, making them a satisfying and nutritious snack.

Including these foods in your daily meals is a simple and delicious way to protect your heart and improve your overall wellbeing. By prioritising antioxidant-rich and anti-inflammatory ingredients, you can take proactive steps towards a healthier, stronger heart.

Portion Control

While the quality of the food you eat is important, the quantity matters just as much for heart health. Overeating, even with nutritious foods, can lead to consuming more calories than your body needs, resulting in weight gain, obesity, and added strain on the heart. Practising portion control and balanced eating are key to maintaining a healthy weight and supporting cardiovascular health.



There are simple ways to manage portion sizes effectively. Use smaller plates to help keep servings in check and avoid the habit of going back for seconds. Paying attention to your body's hunger and fullness signals is an essential part of mindful eating, helping you recognise when you've had enough. Eating slowly and without distractions can also prevent overeating by giving your brain time to register when you're full.

Creating balanced meals involves getting the right mix of macronutrients on your plate. A heart-healthy meal typically includes half a plate of non-starchy vegetables, a quarter filled with lean proteins like chicken, fish, or legumes, and the remaining quarter with whole grains or starchy vegetables. Adding moderate amounts of healthy fats, such as olive oil or avocado, completes the meal, providing essential nutrients while keeping calorie intake under control.

It's also important to be mindful of portion sizes for calorie-dense foods like nuts, seeds, and oils. These are excellent sources of nutrients but can be easy to overconsume due to their high energy content, so careful measurement is key.

By focusing on portion control and building nutrient-dense, balanced meals, you can provide your body with the fuel it needs while keeping your heart healthy. Pair these habits with regular physical activity for a winning formula for long-term heart health.

The Plant-Based and Mediterranean Diets: Pathways to Heart Health

Bringing together key principles like choosing healthy fats, managing sodium, incorporating antioxidants and anti-inflammatory foods, and maintaining balanced eating, we see how two dietary approaches stand out for heart health: plant-based diets and the Mediterranean diet. Both focus on whole, minimally processed foods while limiting red and processed meats, offering a practical framework for a heart-friendly lifestyle.

Plant-based diets centre around fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and whole grains. These foods are packed with fibre, antioxidants, and heart-healthy fats that work together to lower cholesterol, reduce inflammation, and support overall heart function. While fully vegetarian or vegan diets are effective, even mostly plant-based eating with occasional lean meats or fish can provide substantial benefits for your heart. The Mediterranean diet, widely regarded as the gold standard for

heart health, shares many similarities with plant-based eating. It features heart-healthy staples like olive oil, fatty fish, nuts, seeds, and an abundance of fruits and vegetables. Whole grains and legumes deliver sustained energy and nutrients, while herbs and spices add vibrant flavours without relying on salt. This diet minimises red and processed meats, focusing instead on lean proteins such as fish or plant-based alternatives, reducing the risk of heart disease.

Both diets naturally incorporate portion control and balance, promoting mindful eating and prioritising the quality of food over quantity. By choosing nutrient-rich, minimally processed ingredients, you can nourish your body and maintain a healthy calorie balance.

Transitioning to a plant-based or Mediterranean-style diet doesn't have to be overwhelming or restrictive. Start small by introducing a meat-free day each week, replacing butter with olive oil, or simply adding more vegetables to your meals. These small changes can lead to long-lasting habits that support your heart and overall wellbeing.

These diets go beyond nutrition—they represent a way of eating that celebrates the pleasure of wholesome, delicious foods. By adopting these principles, you can enjoy meals that are as good for your heart as they are for your taste buds.



GRILLED MACKEREL WITH CITRUS LENTIL SALAD

Ingredients

- 4 fresh mackerel fillets
- 2 tablespoons olive oil (divided)
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 2 cups cooked lentils (green or brown lentils work best)
- 1 small cucumber, diced
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1/2 red onion, finely diced
- 1 orange, peeled and segmented (plus juice of half an orange)
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh coriander
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar

Prepare the Mackerel:

- In a small bowl, mix 1 tablespoon of olive oil, lemon juice, minced garlic, and black pepper.
- Brush the mackerel fillet generously with the mixture and set aside to marinate for 10 minutes.

Prepare the Lentil Salad:

- In a large bowl, combine the cooked lentils, cucumber, cherry tomatoes, red onion, orange segments, parsley, and coriander.
- In a small bowl, whisk together the remaining olive oil, balsamic vinegar, and orange juice. Drizzle this dressing over the lentil mixture and toss gently to coat. Adjust seasoning with salt and pepper if needed.

Grill the Mackerel:

- Heat a grill pan or barbecue to medium-high heat.
- Grill the mackerel fillets, skin-side down, for 3-4 minutes until the skin is crispy. Flip and cook for an additional 2-3 minutes until the flesh is opaque and flakes easily.

Assemble the Dish:

- Divide the lentil salad evenly among four plates.
- Place a grilled mackerel fillet on top of each portion.

Serve:

- Serve immediately with a lemon wedge for extra zest, if desired.

MEDITERRANEAN ROASTED VEGETABLE AND QUINOA BOWL

Ingredients

- 1 medium courgette, sliced
- 1 small aubergine, diced
- 1 red pepper, cut into strips
- 1 yellow pepper, cut into strips
- 200g cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 red onion, cut into wedges
- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/2 tsp black pepper
- 1 cup quinoa, rinsed and cooked according to package instructions
- 2 large handfuls fresh spinach
- 1/4 cup toasted walnuts or almonds

For the Tahini Drizzle:

- 3 tbsp tahini
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 small clove garlic, minced
- 3-4 tbsp water (to thin)

Prepare the Vegetables:

- Preheat your oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
- In a large bowl, toss the courgette, aubergine, peppers, cherry tomatoes, and red onion with olive oil, oregano, smoked paprika, minced garlic, and black pepper.

Roast the Vegetables:

- Spread the vegetables evenly on a baking tray lined with parchment paper. Roast for 25-30 minutes, stirring halfway through, until tender and slightly caramelised.

Make the Tahini Drizzle:

- In a small bowl, whisk together the tahini, lemon juice, minced garlic, and water. Adjust the water until you achieve a smooth, pourable consistency.

Assemble the Bowl:

- Divide the cooked quinoa among four serving bowls.
- Add a handful of fresh spinach to each bowl, then top with the roasted vegetables.

Garnish and Serve:

- Sprinkle the toasted walnuts or almonds over each bowl. Drizzle generously with the tahini sauce.

HERB-CRUSTED CHICKEN WITH SWEET POTATO MASH AND STEAMED GREENS

Ingredients

- 2 skinless chicken breasts
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh herbs (e.g. thyme, parsley, rosemary)
- 4 tablespoons whole grain breadcrumbs
- 2 medium sweet potatoes, peeled and boiled until tender
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 2 tablespoons milk or plant-based alternative
- 200g broccoli, steamed
- 200g green beans, steamed
- Juice of half a lemon

Prepare the Herb-Crusted Chicken:

- Preheat your oven to 180°C (160°C fan/gas mark 4).
- Lightly coat each chicken breast with olive oil. In a shallow dish, mix the breadcrumbs with the fresh herbs. Press each chicken breast firmly into the breadcrumb mixture to evenly coat.
- Place the coated chicken breasts on a lined baking tray and bake for 20-25 minutes, or until golden and cooked through (internal temperature should reach 75°C).

Make the Sweet Potato Mash:

- Once the sweet potatoes are tender, drain and transfer them to a bowl.
- Mash with the minced garlic, milk, and a drizzle of olive oil until smooth and creamy.

Prepare the Steamed Greens:

- While the chicken is baking, steam the broccoli and green beans until just tender and vibrant green.

Assemble and Serve:

- Plate the herb-crusted chicken alongside a generous scoop of sweet potato mash and a portion of steamed greens.
- Drizzle with fresh lemon juice to enhance the flavours and add a bright, tangy finish.