

Essentials for your shopping trolley

We're already into the second month of the year...New Year's resolutions are beginning to waiver and your '*diet*' may be thrown out of the window. This is just a gentle reminder that the key to health is moderation and variety. To help you keep on track when you go shopping, here are some top priority foods that everyone should put in their shopping trolley:

Whole-wheat or Low GI bread

Eating a diet that is rich in whole-grain products increases the quality of your diet and helps to reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease. These breads are absorbed and digested by the body slower than refined breads, so are perfect for slimmers and diabetics. The high fibre content may help control your hunger and cravings as well as your blood sugar levels. It also helps to reduce your cholesterol levels. At least half of your starch intake should come from whole-grains – this means a minimum of 3 servings of whole-grains per day.

Vegetables and fruit

There is good evidence that eating a diet rich in a range of vegetables and fruit, lowers the risk of coronary artery disease. The antioxidants in the fruit and vegetables may help to reduce the oxidation process and build up of fatty deposits in artery walls (atherosclerosis). They are also rich in the mineral potassium which may help control blood pressure and prevent irregular heart rhythms. Aim to eat at least 5 portions per day. Deeply coloured vegetables and fruit (spinach, salad greens, carrots, pumpkin, peaches and berries) are richer in micronutrients than those such as potatoes and corn. Frozen veggies save time and still provide the same nutrients as fresh ones, so can be used. Remember not to add extra unnecessary calories (sugar, butter, margarine or cream) and salt when serving fruit or vegetables.

Low-fat yoghurt

Many of us tend to forget about dairy, barring the little bit of milk we have in a couple of cups of coffee or tea during the day. The latest scientific research shows that dairy may protect against heart disease, obesity and insulin resistance. There is also some evidence that the live cultures (probiotics) in yoghurt may help lower blood pressure. These probiotics are also beneficial in keeping your digestive system healthy. Adults should eat at least 2 portions of low fat dairy products per day. Low-fat or fat-free yoghurt makes an excellent snack and is a great topping for fruit salads. It can also be used as a base for smoothies or cereals and can be enjoyed as an alternative dressing for salads.

Oily fish

Some varieties of fish, particularly oily fish are rich in the cardio-protective omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA as well as in the fat soluble vitamins A and D. Fish is an excellent alternative to red meat as it is a good protein source but it doesn't have the high saturated fat content that fatty meat does. People with a high risk of cardiovascular disease, should aim to eat oily fish at least twice a week. Good examples include sardines, salmon, mackerel, pilchards, herring and snoek. Fresh tuna, trout, galjoen and kippers are also good sources of omega-3 fatty acids. Canned fish may also be used, but stick to those that are tinned in water or a tomato-based sauce.

Try to use preparation methods that minimise the addition of saturated and trans fats. For example avoid using rich creamy sauces, lemon or garlic butter. Also, avoid frying fish in batter or crumbs - instead use healthier methods such as steaming, baking, poaching, braaing or microwaving.

Nuts, peanut butter and avocados

The best way of improving cholesterol levels is by limiting saturated fats and by substituting them with poly- and mono-unsaturated fats. Although nuts, peanut butter and avocados are high in fat – they should not be regarded as indulgent foods. They should rather be viewed as excellent sources of unsaturated fats that are beneficial in lowering cholesterol levels if modest portions are included in a healthy varied diet. Besides having a range of vitamins and minerals, they are a good source of the antioxidant vitamin E, which helps bolster the body's natural immune system. They also offer a good source of protein and fibre, so when eaten in combination with other foods it will help to slow down absorption and digestion. Adults should include about 3 servings of fats or oils per day. If you have nuts, choose the unsalted variety and stick to a small handful (2 tablespoons) per serving. On whole-wheat crackers or toast, instead of using butter, spread a quarter of a small avocado or 2 tablespoons of delicious peanut butter.

Products with the Heart Mark

An easy guide to help you identify healthier choices on the supermarket shelf, is to look for foods with the Heart Mark. These foods are lower in saturated fat, cholesterol, added sugar and sodium and are high in fibre (if applicable). Heart Mark products have all been independently tested and have to meet stringent nutritional criteria. So when you do your grocery shopping, be heart smart and choose foods with the Heart Mark!

For more information on general heart health contact the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222, email heart@heartfoundation.co.za or visit www.heartfoundation.co.za.

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