February Health Tip

Health Ministries

5 Steps to Delicious, Heart-Smart Meals

"There's no better feeling in the world than a warm pizza box on your lap," comedian Kevin James once quipped.

All joking aside, foods that comfort us can also harm us — so much so, in fact, that too much of a good thing truly can kill us.

When you're diagnosed with heart disease, one of the first things your doctor will discuss with you is making dietary changes. Quickly, you begin to think of all the things you have to give up, and wonder if you'll spend the rest of your life eating rabbit food.

The truth is that you can still enjoy food and flavor while making heart-healthy food choices. In doing so, you can improve several of your heart risks — weight, cholesterol and blood pressure — all at once.

Here are a few suggestions:

1. Calories In, Calories Out

- Know your numbers. Talk to your doctor about the proper calorie intake for your individual needs. The average is 2,000 calories a day, but this can vary widely from person to person.
- Match your exercise to your calorie needs. The formula is simple: make sure you burn off more calories than you take in.

2. Just Say No to the Bad Stuff

- Limit saturated and trans fats. Saturated fats raise your cholesterol. They are found in foods such as fatty meats, whole milk, cheese, and palm and coconut oils. Avoid trans fats because they lower good cholesterol as well as raise bad cholesterol. Trans fats are most often found in processed foods.
- Unsaturated fats can be good for you in small amounts. These can be found in olive oil, nuts, flaxseed and fish.
- Skim fat from the surface of soups and sauces.
- Broil, boil, bake, steam, grill and microwave food. Avoid frying.

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Reduce sodium (salt) intake. Eating too much may increase your blood pressure. Limit sodium to 2,300 milligrams (mg) per day, or less if your doctor recommends it. Dining out less often and eating fewer processed foods are two ways to decrease the salt you consume.

3. Go for Fresh and Flavorful
- Think fresh, think flavorful, think color. At meal time, fill half your plate with bright, crisp, colorful fruits and vegetables, which provide plenty of nutrients without a lot of calories.
- Split the other half of your plate between whole grains and lean protein. Whole grains are high in fiber and rich in vitamins and nutrients. Good choices include whole-wheat bread and pasta, and brown rice.

4. Think Lean
- Lean proteins — like fish, skinless chicken and beans — give you nutrition with less fat.
- Low-fat or nonfat dairy provides nutrients without a lot of fat. Try low-fat or nonfat milk, cheese, or yogurt.

5. Shop Smart
- Read labels. Look for foods that are high in fiber and protein, and low in saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium. Avoid products that contain trans fats.
- Remember that the numbers on labels are usually based on one serving size. If you plan to eat two servings, double all the numbers on the label.
- Try to have at least two servings per week of "fatty" fish such as salmon, sardines, mackerel, rainbow trout and albacore tuna. These contain omega-3 fatty acids, which are good for your heart.
- Choose ingredients that spice up your food without adding calories, fat or sodium. Try these: horseradish, hot sauce, lemon, mustard, nonfat salad dressings, and vinegar. For salt-free herbs and spices, try basil, cilantro, cinnamon, pepper and rosemary.

Thanks to the internet, healthy recipes are in abundance and right at your fingertips. Here are just a couple of the many sites that offer delicious, heart-healthy recipes and cooking advice:

- American Heart Association
- American Diabetes Association

Source: Eating Heart-Healthy Foods, Staywell Krames, 6/25/2015; American Heart Association; Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics; American Diabetes Association