Introduction
A cardiac diet is a diet meant to prevent or treat cardiovascular disease. It is part of the treatment doctors prescribe for patients with heart and blood vessel problems. Heart and blood vessel problems are known as cardiovascular diseases. They are the number one cause of death worldwide.

If you have a cardiovascular disease, your doctor will prescribe a cardiac diet to you. A cardiac diet can help prevent cardiovascular diseases. It can also help prevent diabetes and other diseases associated with obesity.

This reference summary lists the components of the cardiac diet and explains how each component relates to heart health.

Cardiac Diet
There are three main goals of the cardiac diet:
1. Lower blood cholesterol levels
2. Lower blood pressure
3. Reduce body weight

Cholesterol is a type of fat the body needs. However, the body makes enough cholesterol and it is not necessary to eat a lot of it. We get high amounts of cholesterol from animal-derived foods, like meat, eggs and dairy products.

Too much cholesterol in the blood can cause plaque to form on the inner walls of the arteries.
Plaque and deposits of cholesterol on artery walls usually cause them to narrow. This is called atherosclerosis. Atherosclerosis slows down the blood flow to the heart causing angina. It may even block blood flow and cause a heart attack and strokes.

Blood pressure is the pressure of the blood pumped out of the heart as it presses against the wall of the arteries. It is like the pressure of water in a garden hose.

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, damages the blood vessels in the heart. It makes them weaker and more vulnerable to the deposit of plaque. This leads to narrowing of the arteries, which leads to angina, strokes, and potential heart attacks.

High blood pressure can also cause the blood vessels to become wider and weaker. This causes aneurysms. Aneurysms can explode causing bleeding that could be fatal.

Being obese or over-weight can cause heart disease as well as diabetes and kidney disease. Some studies also associate obesity with cancer. An obese person not only has more narrowing of the arteries but also has a heart that is strained. The heart has to work harder to pump oxygen throughout the body, putting the person at a higher risk for heart problems.

The human body needs fat in small quantities. There are generally 2 types of fat:

1. saturated fat
2. unsaturated fat

Saturated fat is usually solid at room temperature and is mainly an animal product. One way to remember this is that Saturated starts with an ‘s’ just like Solid. Saturated can be seen on a steak. It tends to increase the level of cholesterol in the blood and, therefore, is not healthy.

 Unsaturated fats are healthier than saturated fats. Unsaturated fat is usually liquid at room temperature and comes mostly from vegetables.

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Last reviewed: 02/09/2012
Saturated fats are further divided into monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Olive oil is an unsaturated fat.

**Fats and Cholesterol**

Limiting unhealthy fats and cholesterol is the most important step you can take to reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease. There are three types of unhealthy fats: saturated fats, trans fats, and cholesterol.

To limit saturated fat, you should avoid butter and margarine. To limit saturated fat, you can also remove fat from meat or choose meats with less than 10% fat. Saturated fats are also found in dairy products such as whole milk products and cheeses. These should be avoided or eaten in moderation based on your doctor’s instructions.

You should not eat a lot of food rich in cholesterol. Eggs, red meat and shellfish are very high in cholesterol and fat. Egg yolk also has a high level of cholesterol.

It is important to check food labels for information on saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol. Even food that is labeled “reduced fat” can have a lot of trans fat in it. The food labels tell you what percentage of your daily allowance of fat is present in each serving.

Doctors recommend less than 7% of your total daily calories be from saturated fat and less than 1% be from trans fat.

Healthy adults should eat less than 300 mg of cholesterol a day. However, less than 200 mg is recommended for adults with high cholesterol levels. One medium-sized egg has about 200 mg of cholesterol, so if you eat an egg you should avoid eating other foods with high cholesterol that day.

All the cholesterol in the eggs is in the yolk. Egg Beaters® and egg whites do not have cholesterol and can be consumed more liberally.

There are two type of the good unsaturated fat, the fat coming mostly from vegetable products:
- monounsaturated fats such as olive and canola oil and
- polyunsaturated fats such as fats found in nuts
Low-fat Protein

Protein is very important to the body. It helps the body grow muscles and repair tissue. All cells include protein. It is important to eat healthy protein that is low in saturated fat to keep the heart healthy.

Foods that are a good source of protein with low-fat include low-fat dairy products, egg whites or egg substitutes, poultry and fish, and lean meats.

Certain types of fish, such as salmon, mackerel, and herring, are especially good for heart health. These types of fish have a special fat, omega-3 fatty acids, which lowers fat in the blood.

Protein is also present in plant food. We can get the protein our body needs from soy products, beans, peas, and lentils. These healthy vegetables are rich in protein and low in fat. They contain no cholesterol (as cholesterol is found only in animal products because it is a byproduct from the liver).

Protein rich foods that have a lot of fat should be avoided. These include full-fat dairy products like whole milk, fatty meats like bacon, and fried or breaded meat.

Vegetables and Fruits

The body needs vitamins to function well. It also needs fiber to keep a healthy digestive system. More and more studies are finding the importance of eating many servings of vegetables and fruits to stay healthy in general.

Eating more vegetables and fruits can help you get the nutrients your body needs while at the same time avoiding foods that have high-fat content. That is why vegetables and fruits are part of the cardiac diet.

You should choose fruits and vegetables that are fresh or frozen. If you choose canned vegetables, make sure they are low in sodium. Any canned fruits should be packed in juice or water rather than heavy syrup.

Fruits and vegetables are a great snack. Keep them cut and cleaned in your refrigerator for a fast snack when you feel hungry or like munching.

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If you are not accustomed to eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, learn some new recipes of your favorite dishes with added vegetables.

Hiding the fruits you buy in the refrigerator may not help change your habits. Keeping fruits in a bowl on the dinner table where you can see them can remind you to eat them instead of high-fat foods such as chips.

**Grains**

Nutrients that regulate blood pressure and are good for the heart are found in whole grains. Whole grains are also a good source of fiber.

You can easily incorporate more whole grain into your diet by replacing refined grain products with whole grain. Using whole-wheat flour instead of white, refined flour and eating whole-grain bread instead of white bread are easy ways to add whole grain to your diet.

You can also add ground flaxseed to your diet. Ground flaxseed has a lot of fiber and omega-3 fatty acids. This can lower your blood cholesterol levels.

Other whole grain products include cereal with high fiber, oatmeal, and whole-grain pasta.

Muffins, doughnuts, biscuits, or granola bars are usually made with refined grain and should be avoided.

**Sodium**

Sodium is a mineral. It is needed by the body for many functions. However, the body needs about 2 grams or a teaspoon of it every day. Too much sodium may cause hypertension or high blood pressure.

Talk with your healthcare provider about how much sodium is right for you. Different people may have different sodium needs and restrictions.
Reducing the amount of salt you add to food at the table or while cooking is not enough. Most sodium we eat comes from canned or processed foods. Eating more fresh foods can reduce the amount of sodium you take in.

You can also look at the food labels for reduced-sodium canned foods and processed foods. Make sure any condiments you use, like ketchup or soy sauce, are also labeled “reduced-sodium”.

**Portion Size**

Healthy eating depends on eating a variety of foods in the right amounts. Eating too much food can lead to obesity or being overweight. Knowing how much to eat is important in a cardiac diet.

The amount of food eaten is measured in a unit called a "serving." Depending on the food group, the serving size may be measured in cups, grams, slices, or whole fruits. The recommended number of servings from each food group depends mostly on a person's age, sex, height, and level of physical activity.

The number of servings you need from each group depends on the number of calories you need each day. Your healthcare provider will help you determine the amount of servings and the portion size you need each day.

Portion sizes in restaurants are often too big. A “restaurant serving” can be several time the size of a standard serving.

Creating daily menus can help you stick to your cardiac diet and control portion size. If you plan ahead, you can plan more variety. Variety is key in helping you stick with your diet.

**Summary**

While changing your habits can be tough, following a cardiac diet is beneficial for the heart. In addition to exercising, quitting smoking, and managing stress, a cardiac diet can help prevent cardiovascular disease.

Limiting unhealthy fats and cholesterol is the most important step you can take to reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease. Limit your intake of saturated fat, trans fat,
and cholesterol. Check food labels and avoid eating foods that contain large amounts of unhealthy fats.

Protein is very important to the body. It helps the body grow muscles and repair tissue. Good sources of protein include low-fat dairy products, egg whites or egg substitutes, poultry and fish, and lean meats.

Vitamins help the body function well and maintain a healthy digestive system. Eating many servings of vegetables and fruits is one of the best ways to stay healthy in general. When buying canned products, be sure to buy low sodium vegetables and fruits packed in juice or water, not syrup.

Nutrients that regulate blood pressure and are good for the heart are found in whole grains. Whole grains are also a good source of fiber. Use whole-wheat flour instead of white, refined flour and eat whole-grain bread instead of white bread.

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