



GLUTEN
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Heart Healthy Gluten-Free Diet

Updated February 2023

Once you've figured out the basics of staying gluten-free, it's time to consider other aspects of the diet which can also impact your health. Is your gluten-free diet a heart-healthy one? Heart disease is the number one cause of death in the United States. Learn how to reduce your risk by making your gluten-free diet heart-healthy too.

Some gluten-free packaged goods are high in fat, sugar, salt and calories. While it's fine to consume these on occasion, over-reliance on these foods may contribute to weight gain, high cholesterol, insulin resistance, and high blood pressure, all of which increase risk of heart disease.

To help prevent cardiovascular disease, the American Heart Association recommends aiming for an overall healthy dietary pattern that includes using up as many calories as you take in and which emphasizes minimally processed foods; that includes a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains (gluten-free when following a gluten-free diet), healthy sources of protein (mostly plants such as beans and nuts), fish and seafood, low or non-fat dairy, lean versions of meat and poultry if you eat these foods, liquid vegetable oils, low amounts of added sugars and salt, and limited or preferably no alcohol intake. Other non-dietary recommendations include getting sufficient physical activity and avoiding tobacco products.

Fat

Both type and amount are important when it comes to fat intake. Saturated and trans fats raise blood cholesterol and should be limited. Saturated fat is solid at room temperature and found mostly in meat, poultry with skin, whole milk, other high fat dairy products, and even coconut milk. (FDA regulations have greatly reduced trans fats in processed foods; small amounts occur naturally in some foods.) The best fats to use are unsaturated (both polyunsaturated and monounsaturated). Fats which are liquid at room temperature are unsaturated, so this means vegetable oils. In addition, foods which contain unsaturated fats include nuts, seeds, avocado and fatty fish (e.g. salmon, herring, and trout). Moderating total quantity of fats consumed (regardless of type) is important because fat contains more than twice as many calories per gram as protein or carbohydrate (the other two sources of calories in foods). So, too much fat in the diet often translates into too many calories, leading to potential weight gain, which is its own risk factor for heart disease.

Sugar

A concentrated source of empty calories that can contribute to weight gain, thus increasing risk for cardiovascular disease. In addition, high levels of sugar intake have been associated with altered insulin resistance and blood lipid levels, both of which can also independently increase heart disease risk. Keep added sugar intake to a minimum. Opt for fruits instead of candies, baked goods, and other desserts.

**Vegetables,
Fruits,
Legumes and
Gluten-Free
Whole Grains**

Give these foods
a starring role in
your gluten-free
diet and you'll be
on your way.



Sodium

Be aware that some gluten-free foods (as well as non-gluten-free foods) contain large amounts of salt to satisfy our tastes, and also to act as a preservative. Most Americans get far more sodium than the body requires. High sodium intake can raise blood pressure levels, leading to increased heart disease risk. Read the Nutrition Facts labels on packaged foods, and prefer those with lower levels of sodium. Try to choose those with a “% Daily Value” for sodium of less than 10%, and preferably even less than that. When cooking at home, use herbs and spices to season foods in place of excessive amounts of salt.

Fiber

Consuming plenty of fiber can help you feel satiated and may play a role in maintaining a healthy weight. Also, soluble fiber in particular forms a substance in the intestines which helps to block cholesterol absorption, allowing it to be excreted from the body. Good gluten-free fiber sources include vegetables, fruits, legumes (beans, peas & lentils), and gluten-free whole grains.

Maintaining a Healthy Weight

Being overweight increases heart disease risk. As stated above, limiting fat and sugar are important strategies for both reducing heart disease risk and for controlling weight. Including plenty of fiber-rich foods may also help with weight control. The main concept to keep in mind for weight management is the relationship between “calories in” and “calories out” (i.e. used by the body). To maintain a healthy weight, these quantities need to be in balance. To lose weight, calories used by the body needs to exceed calories taken in from food. When the body takes in fewer calories than it uses, it draws on fat stores for the deficit, which means that weight will be lost. So, keeping overall food intake at moderate levels is important. Is it possible to impact the “calories used” end of the equation? You can increase calories “used” through exercise, but it is important to keep in mind that the quantity of calories used in moderate exercise is modest – it can contribute, but is usually not enough on its own to lead to weight loss. Food intake needs to be addressed too. Exercise has other benefits on heart health, though, as well as on overall health, so should definitely be a component of a heart-healthy lifestyle. And some research indicates that individuals who incorporate exercise into their routines have more success with keeping lost weight off.

Reference:

The American Heart Association Diet and Lifestyle Recommendations. 2021. <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/nutrition-basics/aha-diet-and-lifestyle-recommendations>. Accessed 1/23/2023.

This educational bulletin has been produced by the Gluten Intolerance Group of North America, a registered 501(c)3 organization. Learn more about GIG at www.gluten.org.

GIG is on a mission to make life easier for everyone living gluten-free.

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