Getting your fill of the right foods is key to keeping your ticker in top shape

Here’s a heart-grabbing statistic for you: the World Health Organization estimates that cardiovascular disease causes approximately 17.5 million deaths per year worldwide. That’s the bad news. The good news, especially for vegetarians, is that simply exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy weight, and eating smart can prevent 80 percent of cardiovascular disease. “Whether or not you get heart disease is dramatically influenced by the food choices you make,” says Ann G. Kulze, MD, author of Dr. Ann’s 10 Step Diet. “There is solid data that shows vegetarians have a much lower incidence of cardiovascular disease than meat eaters.” In addition to ruling out many of the saturated animal fats that raise cholesterol levels and clog arteries, a well-balanced vegetarian diet pumps your body full of the heart-healthy nutrients found in fruits, veggies, whole grains, and other good-for-you foods. Here’s a handy guide to getting what you need, plus a collection of easy recipes to help you do it.
6 heart-healthy must-haves

Getting recommended amounts of these six food compounds can significantly reduce the risk of heart disease.

1. **Potassium**  “High blood pressure is perhaps the single greatest contributor to the development of heart disease,” says Kulze. Scientists agree that a diet high in the essential mineral potassium is associated with lower blood pressure levels. Potassium lowers blood pressure by countering the effect of excess sodium and by aiding in the transmission of nerve impulses and promoting normal muscle function, both of which are vital for optimal heart and blood vessel function, explains Kulze.  
**Find it in:** Potatoes, bananas, tomatoes, dark leafy greens, prunes, soybeans, lima beans, pumpkin seeds, avocado, almonds

2. **Carotenoids** Thanks to their fat solubility and potent antioxidant properties, these plant chemicals (which give fruits and veggies their red, yellow, and orange hues) are a major force in the fight against heart disease. Evidence suggests they interact with bad LDL cholesterol, preventing it from oxidizing and sticking to artery walls. According to a study published in 2004 in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, women with higher levels of carotenoids in their blood had a 34 percent lower risk of cardiovascular disease.  
**Find them in:** Watermelon, kale, carrots, sweet potatoes, red bell peppers

3. **Flavonoids** Both oxidation and inflammation are involved in the development of cardiovascular disease. “But thanks to their potent antioxidative and anti-inflammatory activity, flavonoids pack a powerful one-two punch against heart disease,” says Kulze. In particular, this large class of plant chemicals keeps the lining of the arteries (endothelial cells) flexible, which improves blood flow and reduces blood clotting. In a 2001 *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* study, researchers reported that a 75-milligram increase in catechin (the flavonoid compounds found in tea and cocoa) intake resulted in a 20 percent reduction in heart disease mortality risk.  
**Find them in:** Cocoa, dark chocolate, green tea, red wine, extra virgin olive oil, pomegranates, apples

4. **Soluble fiber** According to a 19-year survey that examined the effects of fiber intake on heart attacks in about 10,000 adults, those who ingested the most soluble fiber had a 12 percent reduction in coronary heart disease events. So what gives soluble fiber its heart-healthy properties? “It combines with water in the GI tract to form a gelatinous mass that ‘sponges up’ cholesterol, diminishing its absorption and escorting it out of the body,” Kulze explains. “It also slows down the digestion and absorption of carbohydrate foods, giving rise to lower and more stable blood glucose and insulin levels, which has favorable effects on metabolism and arterial health.”  
**Find it in:** Whole grains such as oats and barley; okra; Brussels sprouts

Most Americans get only 15 grams of fiber a day—a far cry from the American Dietetic Association’s recommended 25 grams daily for women and 38 grams for men.

5. **Omega-3 fatty acids** Research continues to confirm that omega-3 fatty acids, a class of polyunsaturated fats, play a key role in heart health. “Omega-3s give rise to anti-inflammatory molecules known as resolvins and protectins, both of which ward off blood clots that can trigger stroke and heart attack,” explains organic chemist Shane Ellison, author of *The Hidden Truth about Cholesterol Lowering Drugs*. Also, in a 2005 Brazilian report that reviewed 159 studies of the effects of omega-3 fatty acids, soluble fibers, and phytosterols on heart health, scientists established that omega-3 fatty acids lower triglyceride levels, a risk factor for heart disease. Researchers also found that they increase good HDL cholesterol, says Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association and author of *The Flexitarian Diet*.  
**Find them in:** Flaxseed; flax oil; walnuts; soy; canola oil; small, dark leafy greens such as watercress, arugula, purslane

6. **B vitamins (folate, B6)** Elevated levels of homocysteine, an amino acid in the blood, are associated with risk of coronary artery disease and stroke. B vitamins folate and B6 work in concert to metabolize or break down homocysteine. Harvard’s famous nurses’ health study showed a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease in women who regularly used multivitamins (a major source of folic acid and vitamin B6) and also in those with high dietary intake of vitamin B6 and folic acid. In another study, reported in the journal *Circulation*, researchers at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation in Ohio found a link between low blood levels of vitamin B6 and folic acid and an increased risk of atherosclerosis, which can lead to heart attacks and stroke.  
**Find them in:** Fortified breakfast cereals, spinach, broccoli, asparagus, potatoes, bananas, sunflower seeds
Recipes for success
The following lusciously easy dishes are packed with the heart-healthful ingredients from the list above.

Quinoa-Stuffed Peppers
SERVES 8 | GLUTEN-FREE

This dish freezes well for future meals. Quinoa provides whole-grain goodness and a serving of protein.

2 Tbs. olive oil
1 medium onion, finely chopped (1 cup)
2 ribs celery, finely chopped (½ cup)
1 Tbs. ground cumin
2 cloves garlic, minced (2 tsp.)
1 10-oz. pkg. frozen chopped spinach, thawed and squeezed dry
2 15-oz. cans diced tomatoes, drained, liquid reserved
1 15-oz. can black beans, rinsed and drained

¾ cup quinoa
3 large carrots, grated (1½ cups)
1½ cups grated reduced-fat pepper jack cheese, divided
4 large red bell peppers, halved lengthwise, ribs removed

1. Heat oil in saucepan over medium heat. Add onion and celery, and cook 5 minutes, or until soft. Add cumin and garlic, and sauté 1 minute. Stir in spinach and drained tomatoes. Cook 5 minutes, or until most of liquid has evaporated.
2. Stir in black beans, quinoa, carrots, and 2 cups water. Cover, and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer 20 minutes, or until quinoa is tender. Stir in 1 cup cheese. Season with salt and pepper, if desired.
3. Preheat oven to 350°F. Pour liquid from tomatoes in bottom of baking dish.
4. Fill each bell pepper half with heaping ¾-cup quinoa mixture, and place in baking dish. Cover with foil, and bake 1 hour. Uncover, and sprinkle each pepper with 1 Tbs. remaining cheese. Bake 15 minutes more, or until tops of stuffed peppers are browned. Let stand 5 minutes. Transfer stuffed peppers to serving plates, and drizzle each with pan juices before serving.

PER ½ STUFFED PEPPER: 279 CAL; 14 G PROT; 10 G TOTAL FAT (3 G SAT FAT); 36 G CARB; 15 MG CHOL; 518 MG SOD; 10 G FIBER; 9 G SUGARS
Sweet Potato Salad with Apple and Avocado

SERVES 6 | VEGAN | 30 MINUTES OR FEWER

GLUTEN-FREE

More a meal than a side dish, this potato salad gets its protein from avocado and pumpkin seeds, both good sources of essential fatty acids. Nutrient-rich corn and diced apple give it crunch. Try serving it over a bed of spinach or arugula.

1 lb. sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into ¼-inch cubes
1 cup frozen corn

¼ cup unsalted hulled pumpkin seeds or pepitas
1 medium red apple, diced (1 cup)
½ small onion, finely chopped (¼ cup)
¼ cup chopped cilantro
¼ cup lime juice
2 Tbs. olive oil
½ avocado, finely diced

1. Place sweet potatoes in large saucepan, and cover with water. Bring to a boil, and cook 3 minutes. Add corn, and cook 1 to 2 minutes more, or until potatoes are tender. Drain in colander and rinse under cold water to cool. Drain well.

2. Toast pumpkin seeds in dry skillet over medium-high heat 3 to 4 minutes, or until seeds begin to pop. Transfer to plate, and cool.

3. Combine apple, onion, cilantro, and lime juice in large bowl. Stir in sweet potatoes, corn, and oil, and season with salt and pepper, if desired. Stir in avocado and toasted pumpkin seeds just before serving.

PER ¾-CUP SERVING: 179 CAL; 3 G PROT; 9 G TOTAL FAT (1 G SAT FAT); 23 G CARB; 0 MG CHOL; 117 MG SOD; 4 G FIBER; 8 G SUGARS
Tempeh au Vin
SERVES 8 | VEGAN

This recipe shows how easy it is to take a French culinary classic and make it veg. Red wine tenderizes tempeh cubes and adds rich flavor to a hearty stew. We've served it with spelt berries, a favorite whole grain in the south of France, but you could just as easily substitute rice, pasta, or your favorite whole grain.

1. Heat 1 Tbs. oil in Dutch oven or large pot over medium-high heat. Add leeks and onions, and cook 3 to 7 minutes, or until beginning to brown, stirring occasionally. Stir in mushrooms, and cook 5 to 7 minutes, or until mushrooms brown and most of their juice has evaporated, stirring occasionally. Add carrots, tempeh cubes, smoky tempeh strips, garlic, and flour, and stir to coat vegetables with flour. Cook 2 to 3 minutes, or until fragrant.

2. Stir in wine and 3 cups water. Add 1 Ib. white button mushrooms, halved (4 cups) and 3 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced (1 Tbs.)

3. Tbs. all-purpose flour

4. Smoky tempeh strips, such as Lightlife, chopped (1 Tbs.)

5. Bay leaves

6. Cups spelt berries

6 cups water 1 ½ hours, or until soft like rice. Drain.

4. Remove tempeh mixture from heat, and stir in remaining 1 Tbs. oil. Season with salt and pepper, if desired, and serve with spelt berries.

Brussels Sprouts with Walnuts and Dried Cranberries
SERVES 6 | VEGAN | 30 MINUTES OR FEWER

Gluten-Free

Brussels sprouts top the charts for soluble fiber, with 2 grams per 1/2-cup serving. We've paired them with omega-3-rich walnuts and walnut oil, then thrown in some dried cranberries for extra tangy flavor and antioxidant flavonoids.

1/2 cup coarsely chopped walnuts
2 tsp. olive oil
1 1/2 lb. Brussels sprouts, trimmed and halved
2 medium shallots, halved and sliced (1/4 cup)
1 clove garlic, minced (1 tsp.)
1 1/4 cups coarsely chopped dried cranberries
1 Tbs. agave syrup
1 Tbs. walnut oil

1. Heat large skillet over medium-high heat. Add walnuts, and toast 3 to 4 minutes, or until fragrant. Transfer to plate, and set aside.

2. Wipe out skillet, and return to heat. Add olive oil, and swirl skillet to coat bottom. Add Brussels sprouts, and cook 5 minutes, or until browned, stirring occasionally. Add shallots and garlic, and cook 1 minute more.

3. Stir in cranberries, agave, and 1 cup water. Partially cover pot, reduce heat to medium, and simmer 5 to 7 minutes, or until most of liquid has evaporated and Brussels sprouts are just tender, but not soft. Transfer to serving bowl. Stir in walnut oil and toasted walnuts, and season with salt and pepper, if desired.

PER 3/4-CUP SERVING: 172 CAL; 5 G PROT; 11 G TOTAL FAT (1 G SAT FAT); 5 G CARB; 0 MG CHOL; 240 MG SOD;
7 G FIBER; 8 G SUGARS

Banana-Flax Breakfast Muffins
MAKES 12 MUFFINS

These morning treats are a lot more healthful than they taste. Ground flaxseed gives them a slightly nutty flavor while providing a dose of omega-3s. If you can't find flaxseed meal, grind whole flaxseeds in a coffee grinder until powdered.

2 cups bran cereal, such as Nature's Path SmartBran or Kellogg's Original All-Bran
1 cup low-fat buttermilk
1/4 cup flaxseed meal or ground flaxseed
4 bananas, divided
1 cup sugar
1 large egg
1/4 cup canola oil
1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
1 tsp. baking powder
1/2 tsp. baking soda
1/2 tsp. ground cinnamon
1/4 tsp. ground nutmeg
1/4 tsp. salt

1. Place cereal, buttermilk, and flaxseed in bowl of food processor, and pulse to combine. Let stand 30 minutes, or until cereal is soft. Preheat oven to 350°F. Coat 12-cup muffin pan with cooking spray.

2. Add 3 bananas to cereal mixture, and process until smooth. Add sugar, egg, and oil, and process until smooth.

3. Whisk together flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt in bowl. Add to cereal mixture in food processor, and pulse until smooth.

4. Fill each muffin cup with 1/2 cup batter. Slice remaining banana into 1/4-inch-thick
rounds, and place on tops of muffins. Bake 20 to 25 minutes, or until muffin tops are browned and toothpick inserted in center comes out clean. Cool on wire racks.

PER MUFFIN. 252 CAL; 5 G PROT; 7 G TOTAL FAT (=1 G SAT FAT); 48 G CARB; 18 MG CHOL; 201 MG SOD; 5 G FIBER; 24 G SUGARS

**The Heart-Healthiest Chocolate Chip Cookies in the World**

**MAKES 30 COOKIES | VEGAN | 30 MINUTES OR FEWER**

When you replace butter and eggs with ground walnuts, and all-purpose flour with a blend of oat flour and oatmeal, you get a moist, chewy, vegan cookie that's loaded with good-for-your-heart ingredients.

- 2 cups walnuts
- 3 Tbs. canola oil
- 1 cup light brown sugar
- 2 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1½ cups oat flour
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 1 tsp. salt
- ¼ tsp. ground cinnamon
- 2 cups rolled oats
- 3 3.5-oz. bars bittersweet vegan chocolate, chopped, or 1½ cups vegan chocolate chips (12 oz.)

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Coat 2 baking sheets with cooking spray, or line with parchment paper.
2. Blend walnuts in food processor 30 seconds, or until ground into a fine meal. Add canola oil, and blend 2 to 3 minutes more, or until mixture has the consistency of natural peanut butter, scraping down sides of food processor occasionally. Transfer to bowl.
3. Whisk together brown sugar and 
½ cup water in small saucepan, and bring mixture to a boil. Pour brown sugar mixture over ground walnut butter, add vanilla extract, and stir until no lumps remain.
4. Whisk together oat flour, baking soda, salt, and cinnamon in separate bowl. Stir oat flour mixture into walnut mixture. Cool 10 minutes. Fold in oats, then chocolate chips.
5. Shape cookie dough into 2-inch balls, and place 2 inches apart on prepared baking sheets. Flatten cookies with bottom of drinking glass dipped in water. Bake 8 to 10 minutes, or until cookies begin to brown and tops look dry. Cool 3 minutes on baking sheets, then transfer to wire rack to cool completely.

PER COOKIE. 173 CAL; 3 G PROT; 10 G TOTAL FAT (3 G SAT FAT); 21 G CARB; 0 MG CHOL; 122 MG SOD; 2 G FIBER; 12 G SUGARS