**Key Points**

- People who eat plant-based diets are less likely to suffer from heart disease than the general population.
- To enjoy the benefits of plant-based eating it’s not necessary to cut out all animal foods from the diet, instead it’s about putting plant foods first.
- Choosing more plant foods such as soyfoods and legumes (e.g., beans, peas, lentils), whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds instead of animal foods, like meat and dairy, can help lower the saturated fat content and increase the polyunsaturated fat and fibre content of the diet.
- Soyfoods protect the heart in a number of ways and so are ideal foods to include in a plant-based diet.
- A combination of dietary factors common to plant-based diets are thought to work together to keep the heart healthy.

**Introduction**

Plant-based diets, which are mostly or completely made up of plant foods, are becoming more and more popular because of the benefits they bring to both our health and the health of the planet. While there are many advantages to plant-based eating, one particular benefit, where the evidence really stands out, is in keeping our hearts healthy.

**What is a plant-based diet?**

There’s no exact definition of a plant-based diet, yet many people think of this as being a strictly vegetarian diet. However the term ‘vegetarian’ is very broad and includes a whole range of eating styles - from a diet that completely avoids all animal products (vegan) to one that is mainly plant-based but occasionally includes meat and/or fish (semi-vegetarian).

There are clearly many types of plant-based diets. To reduce your risk of heart disease, it isn’t necessary to completely eliminate animal foods from the diet. There’s unanimous agreement among nutrition experts and health organisations that huge benefits can still be achieved by simply shifting towards eating more plant foods such as soyfoods and legumes (e.g., beans, peas, lentils), whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, while at the same time cutting down on meat and dairy foods.

**How does a plant-based diet help support a healthy heart?**

Although many lifestyle factors affect heart health, such as smoking, stress and exercise, diet is one of the most important. In particular, a vegetarian diet has been shown to be especially helpful. Numerous studies have found that vegetarians have lower death rates from heart disease than the general population. This is particularly true for vegetarian men, who are up to half as likely to die from heart disease.

Why are vegetarian diets so protective? Although vegetarians tend to be more health conscious, for example smoking less and weighing less, even when these differences are taken into account, heart disease rates among vegetarians are still much lower than the general population. It’s likely there are many elements of a plant-based diet that contribute to this benefit. For example, vegetarian diets are lower in saturated (bad) fat, higher in polyunsaturated (good) fats and fibre than diets based on meat. Also, vegetarians tend to eat more soyfoods; these foods have been found to have a number of specific benefits - such as lowering blood cholesterol and blood pressure.

**Plant-Based Eating Lowers Blood Cholesterol**

There are two major types of cholesterol in the blood - LDL-Cholesterol (LDL-C), often referred to as the ‘harmful or bad’ cholesterol and HDL-Cholesterol (HDL-C), considered the ‘good’ cholesterol. High blood levels of LDL-C increase risk of heart disease.

Many studies have found that people who eat a plant-based diet have lower LDL-C than meat eaters. While the healthier fat content of a plant-based diet may partly explain this difference, there’s also a number of foods and nutrients commonly found in vegetarian diets that have been shown to lower cholesterol – soya protein, nuts, soluble fibre and plant sterols. Combining these factors into a diet that was also low in saturated fat, called the Portfolio Diet, was shown to lower LDL-C by 30%.

Soyfoods can lower cholesterol in a number of ways. Firstly, the protein in soya has been shown to directly lower cholesterol by around 5%. Secondly, soya is a good source of healthy fats - replacing foods that are high in saturated fat, such as meat and dairy, with soyfoods that contain polyunsaturated fat, lowers LDL-C by an extra 4%. Finally, soya contains isoflavones, natural plant compounds, which may also help against heart disease.
The good news is that you don’t have to give up animal foods altogether. One study compared the cholesterol-lowering effects of a standard heart-healthy diet with the same diet but which contained more whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes and about half as much meat. While both diets reduced LDL-C, the diet that contained less meat and more plant foods reduced LDL-C twice as much.

Although replacing foods high in saturated fats for polyunsaturated fats is a key dietary recommendation for lowering cholesterol, there’s now evidence to suggest that a mixture of omega-6 polyunsaturated fat and omega-3 polyunsaturated fat (as is found in soya) is needed to get maximum benefit. Using a combination of the omega-6 and omega-3 fats has been shown to reduce heart disease risk by approximately 20%. If no omega-3-containing fish are included in a plant-based diet it’s important to eat plenty of plant sources of the omega-3 fat, such as soy foods, flaxseed and walnuts.

Plant-Based Eating Reduces Blood Pressure

Vegetarians have lower blood pressure than non-vegetarians. Also, vegetarians are less likely to suffer with high blood pressure (hypertension) compared to non-vegetarians. Studies have found that as more plant foods are included in the diet, at the expense of animal foods, the bigger the drop in hypertension rates.

As in the case of blood cholesterol, it’s likely that a number of dietary components found in plant-based diets work together to lower blood pressure. For example: their higher intakes of plant protein, particularly soya protein and their higher intakes of fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetable contain numerous components, such as the essential nutrient potassium, which help to lower blood pressure.

Examples of two plant-based diets known to reduce blood pressure include the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet and the Mediterranean diet. The latter, which is based on a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, olive oil, fish, whole grains, legumes and nuts, with smaller amounts of meat and dairy foods and moderate amounts of alcohol, has been shown to be particularly helpful in reducing the risk of heart disease.

Conclusions

- A plant-based diet has been proven to keep hearts healthy.
- People eating plant-based diets have lower body weights, blood cholesterol and blood pressure (established risk factors for heart disease) than meat eaters.
- Plant-based diets are lower in saturated fat, higher in polyunsaturated fat and fibre than diets based on animal products, and also include more of a number of foods and nutrients that are known to be good for the heart. This combination is likely to be responsible for the lower heart disease rates among vegetarians.
- It’s not necessary to cut out all animal foods from the diet - shifting the balance in favour of plant foods can bring about major benefits.
- Soyfoods should be considered key foods in a plant-based diet as they are low in saturated fat, provide a healthy mix of omega-6 and omega-3 fats and are good sources of fibre and plant protein.

Interested? Have a look on www.ensa-eu.org for more details and references or contact us via secretariat@ensa-eu.org