

Eating For Your Heart Wendy Warner, MD, ABHM

February, the month when we all focus on the heart. Usually, we think of emotions and romance, but let's also think of the health of our hearts. (Besides, if we don't have healthy hearts, we won't be much good in the romance department!).

Many of us think we know how to eat for a healthy heart. We know that we're supposed to eat more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains, and healthy fats. Turning this knowledge into practice, however, is often a problem. Several research studies compared ways of eating that may seem very similar on the surface, but showed very different results in terms of heart health.

One study compared a whole foods diet rich in produce, seeds and nuts, and healthy fats to what many of us might attempt to do: a diet low in saturated fats, heavy on milled whole wheat products and low fat dairy. (Think of switching to low fat cheese, bran cereal and whole wheat bread, but not really increasing your veggies at all). In this study, cholesterol levels (and subsequent heart issues) decreased somewhat in the latter diet (~8% improvement), but nearly 28% improvement on the whole foods diet. So what is the difference? Whole foods means just that---eating foods as close to how they exist in nature as possible. This means cooking grains, rather than eating pasta and bread, and eating as many servings of produce as possible each day (shoot for 8). Also important is including sources of healthy fats, such as nuts and seeds---preferably walnuts, almonds, olive oil, avocados, sesame seeds and pumpkin seeds.

Other important nutrients for heart health include polyphenols and plant sterols. Polyphenols can be found in wine, tea and grape juice; plant sterols can be found in seeds and nuts. I DON'T suggest using table spreads that include plant sterols, such as Benacol®---although they can claim "no trans fats", they actually have 0.5 grams of trans fats per serving and get to round down to zero. Many people use these spreads fairly liberally, so they actually consume a good many trans fats over the course of the day! Soluble fiber is also important to heart health; find this in beans, lentils, apples, pears, oats and barley.

Ok, so how do you translate this into the real world? Start the day with oatmeal---the real thing, not those packages of presweetened oatmeal. Add some walnuts and either dates or raisins. Include a small amount of juice with the meal, and preferably tea rather than coffee. For lunch, have a salad of dark greens, not iceberg, and include some garbanzo beans, lots of red pepper and carrot, and a sprinkling of hemp seeds or pumpkin seeds, using olive oil for the dressing. In the afternoon, snack on whole grain rice and flax crackers such as "Mary's Gone Nuts" brand with an apple. Then for dinner, have fish, lentils, broccoli and winter squash, with a glass of wine and chocolate for dessert (just a piece of dark chocolate, not some gooey sugary dessert that is flavored with

chocolate). All of this, and you'll be healthy enough to enjoy the romance of this month!