



## DEPARTMENT OF **PUBLIC HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES**

### February 2026 Nutrition Article **Heart Health for Older Americans**

February 14 marks Valentine’s Day, a special holiday to recognize loved ones. February is also a time to focus on heart health, especially for older adults. Heart disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States, and nearly 16% of adults over 65 are diagnosed with coronary heart disease. February is recognized as Heart Health Month, a time to spotlight the dangers of heart disease.

While the risk of heart disease increases with age, many heart-related conditions can be managed or prevented through everyday lifestyle choices. The most important lifestyle choices affecting heart health include nutrition, physical activity, stress, drinking alcohol, and tobacco use. Clinical factors that lead to a higher risk also include obesity, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure.

Nourishment is the foundation of life and disease prevention. Below are some tips on how to use nutrition appropriately (and clinically) to reduce the risk of heart disease.

#### **Added Sweetener**

“Life is short, make it sweet” is an easy motto to lean into when buying sweets to satisfy our sweet tooth. We can certainly enjoy added sweeteners without risk of health complications, but the pattern of overconsumption, coupled with erroneous health claims and the ubiquitous use of alternative sweeteners in myriad food products, keeps older Americans in the danger zone.

Sugar is not evil – but, unfortunately, we have moved far away from using quality, natural sweeteners like honey, pure maple syrup, blackstrap molasses, and even regular table sugar in foods we prepare for ourselves. Rather, we rely on commercially prepared meals and snacks LOADED with added sugar and alternative sweeteners, which drive chronic inflammation and strain the heart.

With 61 different names for added sugar and 17 FDA-approved alternative sweeteners, it’s important to be intentional about sugar intake. You can spot alternative sweeteners only in the ingredient list, and the standardized food label shows how much added sugar a product contains, so you can stay within the American Heart Association’s 40g/day (10 tsp) recommendation. By minimizing added sugar and reducing or eliminating alternative sweeteners, your cravings for sweets will begin to decrease.

#### **Fiber**

Fiber also plays an important role in the health of older adults. It helps reduce the risk of heart disease and other chronic conditions such as diabetes and cancer. It also supports healthy digestion, promotes a sense of fullness, and helps prevent constipation.

An estimated 95% of adults do not consume adequate fiber, which reflects low consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, or legumes (nuts, seeds, beans) – the primary sources of dietary fiber. While these foods contain high-quality fiber, the amounts vary. Older adults should aim for about 21g of fiber per day. To put it into perspective, 1/2 cup of chickpeas has 11 grams of fiber, 1/3 cup of almonds has 6 grams, 1 cup of cooked oatmeal has 4 grams, a medium banana has 3 grams, and 1/4 cup of pumpkin seeds has 2 grams.

Be mindful of ready-to-eat products that tout “high fiber,” as they often rely on synthetic fibers (like supplements) and can also include a lot of added sweeteners. Plain, wholesome foods will always be best for your fiber foundation. A good assessment is to compare your current intake to the recommendations of 21g/day and make necessary adjustments to develop a routine of eating that meets those recommendations.

## Overall Nourishment from Quality Food Groups

As real, whole foods have been replaced with ultra-processed options, overall health has declined. We're meant to eat real food.

The body is a machine, and many parts must work systematically to maintain resilience against chronic disease, especially heart disease. Although some clinical situations demand a particular restrictive diet, no matter who you are, your body requires the nutrients found in real food, without synthetic additives or ultra-processing. This is literally the gas your body needs to be well.

The biggest issue affecting older adults is undernourishment. Many are not eating enough or not choosing nutrient-dense foods. What's in a food matters most when determining whether it supports health. Remember, real foods contain the nutrients nature intended, yet about 70% of Americans rely heavily on ultra-processed products. It's not surprising that more than 70% also live with one or more chronic diseases. In short, you are what you eat. Do you want to be cheap, easy, and fake?

To determine whether a food is truly "real," look to the ingredient list – would your grandmother recognize all ingredients? Food quality matters but getting the right balance of nutrients is equally important. With only so many waking hours to meet daily nutrition needs for heart health, aim to combine multiple quality food groups at each meal, include a couple at snacks, eat consistently throughout the day, choose mostly whole foods without synthetic ingredients, and limit meals and snacks prepared outside the home.

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## Recipe of the Month

### Cinnamon and Apple Oatmeal

Being in charge of your sweeteners helps keep your heart healthy.

#### INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup whole milk or water
- ½ cup dry oatmeal
- 1 apple, chopped
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- 1 tsp honey or maple syrup
- 1 Tbsp chia or flax seeds

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. In a saucepan, bring the milk or water to a soft boil.
2. Mix in oatmeal and bring to a simmer.
3. Let oatmeal cook for approximately 15 minutes or until all liquid is absorbed.
4. Remove from heat and stir in cinnamon, honey or maple syrup, and chia or flax seeds.
5. Stir in apple.
6. Enjoy!

