

2-2014

Heart Smart

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Recommended Citation

Craig, Winston J., "Heart Smart" (2014). *Lake Union Herald*. 108.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs/108>

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More colored and leafy vegetables are good for your heart.

Heart Smart

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

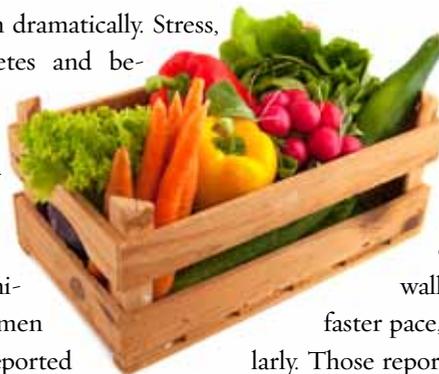
Step up your walking speed for better health.

The heart is a tireless worker, silently pumping blood around the body, all day, every day. Beating 100,000 times a day, it pumps a total of 2,000 gallons daily. It deserves special attention, since heart disease is our No. 1 killer. Our life depends upon our heart functioning effectively.

Our lifestyle influences heart health dramatically. Stress, smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes and being overweight are all associated with a greater risk of heart disease, while proper food choices and regular exercise do much to promote a healthy heart and healthy blood vessels.

Recently, researchers at Harvard University tracked 115,000 men and women during a period of two decades, and reported the risk of dying from heart disease was 29 percent lower among those eating nuts daily compared with those who never ate nuts. Those with the highest intake of fruit and vegetables (not including potatoes and fruit juices) had a 17 percent lower risk of heart disease. A higher consumption of citrus fruit, green leafy vegetables, and those fruits and vegetables rich in carotenoids (yellow-orange pigments) and vitamin C were associated with a lower risk of heart disease. The data suggested that the absolute quantity, rather than the variety of fruit and vegetable intake, was the important factor in lowering the risk of heart disease.

Consuming a traditional Mediterranean diet (rich in olive oil, fruit, nuts, vegetables and cereals, and low in dairy, meats and sweets) is known to be associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular disease. In the PREDIMED study in Spain, involving more than 7,400 persons at high cardiovascular risk, researchers reported recently that participants consuming a Mediterranean diet supplemented with either extra-virgin olive oil (4 tablespoons/day) or an ounce of mixed nuts (walnuts, almonds and hazelnuts) experienced



a 30 percent reduced risk of heart attack and stroke compared to those consuming a reduced fat control diet.

Results from the National Walkers' Health Study, tracking 39,000 recreational walkers, found that the risk of death increased substantially in those walking slower than 2.5 mph compared with a faster pace, even among subjects who exercised regularly. Those reporting a pace slower than a 24-minute mile showed a 44 percent increased risk for all-cause mortality, a 44 percent increased risk of cardiovascular diseases, and a five-fold increased risk of dementia.

In the Adventist Health Study report last summer, vegetarians had a 20 percent reduction in risk of dying from heart disease, with the risk reduction being greater in men than in women. In another study, those who ate dry beans and lentils four or more times a week showed a 22 percent lower risk of heart disease.

Although firefighters are exposed to many occupational risks, only lifestyle factors were significant predictors of heart disease for them. Consumption of whole grains and a lower body weight were associated with a reduced risk of heart disease. Greater whole grain cereal intakes are known to substantially lower the risk of heart disease and hypertension. The bran layer provides magnesium, phytosterols and the antioxidant ferulic acid to protect us against chronic diseases.

Winston J. Craig, Ph.D., RD, is a professor of nutrition at Andrews University.