

Healthy Hearts, Happy Summers: Summer Tips for Wellness

As the sun shines brighter and the days are longer, it's a great time to focus on your heart health. Cardiovascular disease continues to be a leading health concern in our community, but the good news is many risk factors can be lessened by changing your daily habits.

Here are five easy steps to give your heart some love this summer:

1. Get Outside and Get Moving

Enjoy the warm weather with a walk, a bike ride, or a water activity. Just 30 minutes a day of moderate exercise can help reduce your risk of heart disease, lower blood pressure, and improve your mood.

2. Eat Fresh and Seasonal

Take advantage of summer produce like berries, leafy greens, tomatoes, and watermelon. These foods are rich in fiber, antioxidants, and nutrients that support heart health. Don't forget to stay hydrated—water is your heart's best friend in the heat.

3. Watch the Salt and Processed Foods

Summer barbecues make for delicious meals and snacks, but too much salt and processed food can raise blood pressure. When picking foods, aim for grilled vegetables, lean meats like chicken or fish, and season meals with fresh herbs instead of salt.

4. Be Heat-Smart

Hot weather puts extra strain on the heart, especially for older adults and those with preexisting conditions. Avoid stressing your heart by exercising early in the morning or later in the evening, wear breathable clothing, and take breaks in the shade or air conditioning when needed.

5. Stress Less, Sleep More

Even though the sun is shining brighter and longer than it has in some time, make sure to plan times to slow down. Whether it's a short vacation, a picnic in the park, or just quiet time at home, make space to relax. Good sleep and low stress levels are essential for maintaining heart health.

6. Heart Challenge:

Try a 20-minute walk every day or swap one salty snack for a fresh fruit or veggie. Share your heart-healthy goals with friends or family to stay motivated!

Your heart works hard for you every day. This month, take a few simple steps to return the favor—and enjoy a summer filled with energy, health, and joy.

Ultra processed foods and heart health

Many of us may have heard that processed foods are not good for our health. Fewer of us, however, may know that there is a difference between processed, and ultra-processed. Processed food refers to any food that has gone through a process that changes its makeup. This means heating, freezing, dicing, or juicing. Baby carrots, canned beans, diced tomatoes, broccoli florets, and frozen peas are all considered processed foods. The foods listed above are all healthy! Foods that are listed in the ultra-processed food group, however, have little to no nutritional value.

Ultra processed refers to foods that consist of mostly of substances that are added to food that increase shelf life, flavor, or both. Sugars, fats, and salts are some of the ingredients that are typically added for flavor purposes. Emulsifiers, stabilizers, and preservatives are typically added for increasing the time an item will be shelf stable and maintain the consistency of the item. Dyes are also commonly added to these foods to try and lure people- most commonly children- into buying them.

Foods that many of us give our children as snacks, including fruit snacks, potato chips, baked goods, soda, processed meats, and mass-produced bread fall under the ultra-processed category. A good rule of thumb is, if you have to put little to no effort into the food you are eating, it is probably considered ultra-processed. Instant noodles, rice cups, “just add water” and throw it in the microwave meals are most likely ultra-processed.

According to the AHA, heavy processing may also strip out fiber, altering how the body digests food and affecting friendly gut bacteria. Ultra-processed foods now account for over 50% of total caloric intake in many developed nations, including the U.S., according to a 2024 report by the World Health Organization. Researchers warn this dietary shift is driving up rates of hypertension, obesity, and type 2 diabetes — all major risk factors for cardiovascular disease. Those with diets higher in ultra-processed foods are also found to have higher rates of depression.

The issue with this is that for many, the cost of healthy foods is more expensive than those that are unhealthy for us. A McDonald’s meal, or a box of fruity cereal will last longer than a container of berries, and provide meals. While taking food dyes and processed oils out of “fast” food or snack items isn’t bad, what are they going to be adding in their place to keep them shelf stable or “pretty”? Also, this is still not solving the problem that good quality fruits, vegetables, and proteins are largely unaffordable and inaccessible to most. Food deserts, or areas with little to no access to fresh produce (either due to short growing seasons, or no grocery store access), causes prices to increase due to increased shipping and storage costs.

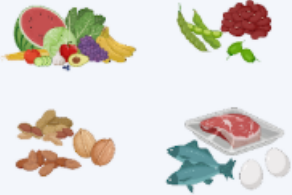
This summer, challenge yourself to swap two ultra-processed foods for unprocessed or minimally processed food. Or even better, start your own garden and grow your own unprocessed foods with minimal investments. Your future self will thank you!

NOVA Food Classification System

Group I

Unprocessed or minimally processed foods

Fresh, dry or frozen vegetables or fruits, grains, legumes, meat, fish, eggs, nuts and seeds.



Processing includes removal of inedible or unwanted parts and preparation for storage

Group II

Processed culinary ingredients

Plant oils (e.g., olive oils, coconut oil), animal fats (e.g., cream, butter), maple syrup, sugar, honey, and salt.



Substance derived from group I foods or nature by processes include milling, grinding, refining, pressing, and drying

Group III

Processed foods

Bottled vegetables, canned fish, fruits in syrup, beer, wine, cheeses, and freshly made bread.



Created by adding salt, oil, sugar, or other substances from group II to group I foods

Group IV

Ultra-processed foods

Sugar sweetened beverages, burger, pizza, ice-creams, sweet and savory packed snacks, instant soups and chicken nuggets.



Formulations made mostly or entirely from substances derived from foods and additives. Includes very little intact Group I