Five Best Fruits and Vegetables for Heart Health

When talking about best foods for heart health, most people tend to focus the discussion on fat, saturated versus trans-fat or healthy omega-3s. Of course, the type of fat in your diet does make a difference in the health of your heart, but there are a lot of other foods that can also help keep your heart healthy in slightly different ways. Fruits and vegetables contain no fat, but provide powerful nutrients, antioxidants, and fiber to improve cardiovascular health. Here are the five best fruits and veggies to keep your heart healthy.

1) Strawberries. Two recent studies have found that consuming fresh strawberries may reduce cholesterol and oxidative stress that lead to cardiovascular disease. Both studies required participants to consume a diet rich in strawberries before testing different factors in their blood to determine the effect of the increased strawberry consumption. One of the studies, from the Journal of Nutritional Biochemistry, required that participants eat 500 grams of fresh strawberries daily for 30 days. During that time the participants' LDL cholesterol fell an average of 13.7% and triglycerides were reduced by approximately 20%. The reason for this drop may be the anthocyanins in the strawberries, a group of phytochemicals that reduce free radicals.

2) Raisins. These tiny dried grapes may be a great snack for people looking to lower their blood pressure, a risk factor for heart disease. A paper recently presented at the American College of Cardiology's Scientific Sessions found that when raisins were eaten as a snack participants' blood pressure was about 4.8-7.2% less than participants who ate other snacks. It is believed that the potassium, fiber, and antioxidants in the raisins helped lower participants' blood pressure.

3) Broccoli. This cruciferous vegetable contains a sulfur-based compound called sulforaphane, which has been shown to reduce blood pressure and other cardiovascular disease risk factors. Sulforaphane is a isothiocyanate, a group of compounds responsible for the health benefits found in all cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower. This group of compounds has been shown to reduce inflammation, help improve blood pressure, and may even reduce the damaging effect of free radicals on the heart.

4) Garlic. Garlic, onions, chives, and shallots are all part of the allium family of vegetables and have shown extensive health benefits, especially when it comes to cardiovascular disease. Garlic, specifically, has been shown to decrease LDL, increase antioxidant levels, and reduce hypertension. It may also reduce enzymes involved in LDL formation and the synthesis of other types of fats in the body.

5) Yams/Sweet potatoes. These powerful potatoes are consistently on the list of “superfoods” due to their high fiber, beta carotene, vitamin B_6, and potassium content. Fiber helps reduce the absorption of dietary cholesterol in the blood stream, by trapping cholesterol and fat in the digestive system so it is unable to be absorbed. Deficiencies in vitamin B_6 have been shown to increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, which may be related to the role it plays in decreasing levels of homocysteine. Beta carotene is a powerful antioxidant which may help reduce inflammation and lower cardiovascular risk factors.