

# HEALTHY U

YOUR SOURCE AND GUIDE FOR HEALTHY LIVING



## THIS MONTH AT A GLANCE:

This month, our wellness initiative focuses on heart health and simple habits you can build to support a healthy heart.

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# Building Healthy Habits for a Healthy Heart

Cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death globally, but many of these conditions are preventable through lifestyle changes and regular health monitoring. Caring for your heart involves a combination of balanced nutrition, regular exercise, stress management, and medical check-ups.

## Healthy Eating



A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats helps maintain healthy blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Reducing sodium, processed foods, and sugary beverages is key for heart health.

## Physical Activity



Regular exercise strengthens the heart muscle, improves blood circulation, and reduces the risk of obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Experts recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise per week.

## Avoid Smoking and Limit Alcohol



Smoking damages blood vessels and accelerates atherosclerosis, while excessive alcohol intake can lead to high blood pressure and cardiomyopathy. Quitting smoking and moderating alcohol intake significantly reduce cardiovascular risk.

## Manage Stress and Sleep Well



Chronic stress increases heart disease risk. Techniques such as mindfulness, yoga, and adequate sleep (7-9 hours per night) are essential for cardiovascular well-being.

## Regular Health Check-Ups

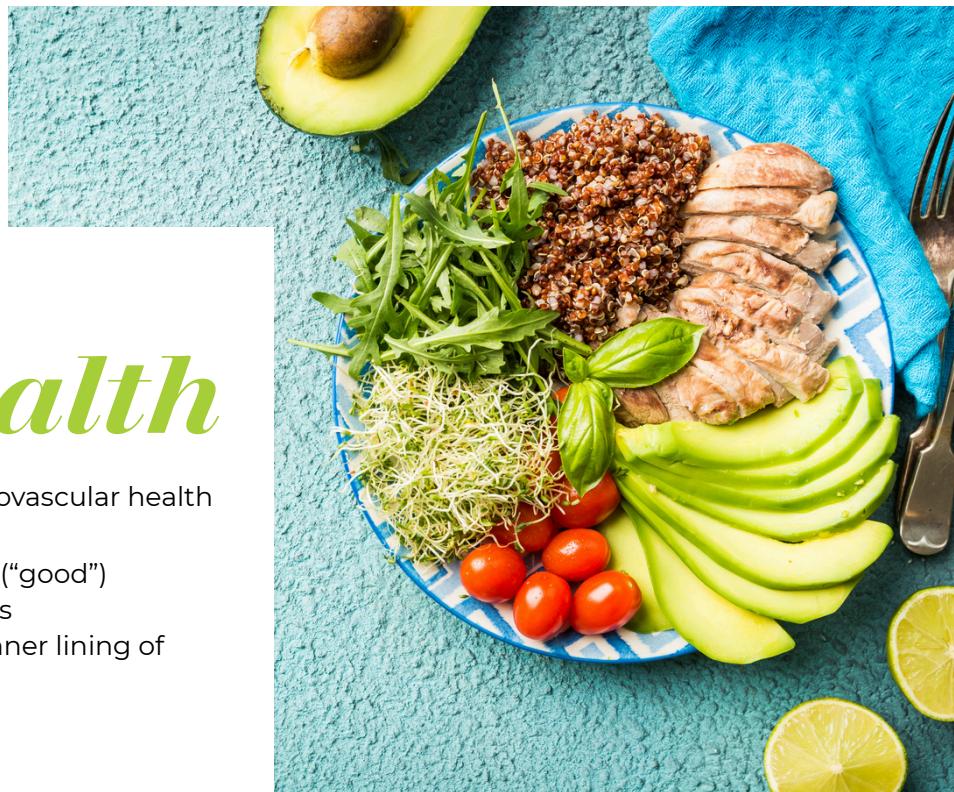


Monitoring blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels allows early detection of heart disease risk factors. Preventive care can save lives by catching conditions before they become severe.

# Nutrition & Heart Health

Nutrition plays a multidimensional role in cardiovascular health and can have an effect on:

- Blood lipids, including LDL (“bad”) and HDL (“good”) cholesterol, triglycerides, and oxidative stress
- Endothelial Function , or the health of the inner lining of blood vessels
- Inflammation
- Insulin levels and insulin resistance
- Blood pressure



## What is LDL Cholesterol?

LDL cholesterol is often called “bad” cholesterol because high levels can increase the risk of heart disease, while HDL cholesterol is known as “good” cholesterol for its protective role. When people are told they have high cholesterol, they need to lower LDL levels.

An effective way to do this is by reducing saturated fat intake. However, what matters just as much as what you remove from the diet is what you replace it with. The quality of fats and carbohydrates plays a key role in supporting heart health.

It is best to replace saturated fat with polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs), monounsaturated fatty acids (MUUFAs), and carbohydrates from whole foods. Focus eating habits on heart-healthy foods while limiting choices that increase risk, including excess calories.

Research shows that even replacing 1% of calories from saturated fat with:

CARBOHYDRATE	PUFA	MUFA
LDL decreases by	LDL decreases by	LDL decreases by
1.5 mg/dL	2.1 mg/dL	1.6 mg/dL
Triglycerides decreases by	Triglycerides decreases by	Triglycerides decreases by
0.97 mg/dL	0.88 mg/dL	0.55 mg/dL

## Blood Pressure and Heart Health

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against artery walls. High blood pressure increases the risk for heart attacks, strokes, chronic heart failure, and kidney disease.

The American Heart Association and American College of Cardiology recommend reducing dietary sodium to lower blood pressure.



Making just four simple swaps can cut up to 1,000 mg of sodium from your daily intake. Each change can reduce sodium by 250 mg or more. Choose options that support better health.



## Identifying Salty Foods

The American Heart Association identifies the six foods that provide the most sodium (42% of average US intake), called the Salty Six.

1. Sandwiches	3. Bread	5. Soup
2. Pizza	4. Poultry	6. Deli Meat

An additional 13% of the average U.S. sodium intake comes from grain-based mixed dishes and mixed dishes containing meat, poultry, or seafood. Other common sources include savory snack foods, condiments, cheese, and processed vegetables and legumes.

It can also be helpful to know what different FDA-approved nutrition claims on labels mean, such as:

- Salt/Sodium-Free: less than 5 mg in a serving
- Very Low Sodium: 35 mg or less in a serving
- Low Sodium: 140 mg or less in a serving
- Reduced Sodium: at least 25% less sodium than the “regular” version of the product
- Light in Sodium or Lightly Salted: at least 50% less sodium than the “regular” version of the product

*Keep in mind that reduced-sodium, light-in-sodium, or lightly salted products may still contain significant amounts of sodium, depending on the sodium content of the regular version of the recipe.*



## Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH)

The Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet is effective at all blood pressure levels but has the greatest effect in people with high blood pressure or people who consume a high-sodium diet. Additionally, it augments the effectiveness of anti-hypertension medications.

In a study comparing the DASH diet with 2,400 mg sodium to a standard U.S. diet with 3,300 mg sodium, blood pressure decreased by 7.1/3.6 mm Hg with the DASH diet.

## Reducing Added Sugars

Reducing added sugars is important for heart health and overall well-being. Consuming too much added sugar increases the risk of heart disease, weight gain, and metabolic problems.

Experts recommend that no more than 5–10 percent of daily calories come from added sugars.

Examples by calorie intake:

- 2,000 calories per day: 25–50 grams maximum
- 1,600 calories per day: 20–40 grams maximum

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020–2025 suggest keeping added sugars at 10 percent or less of total daily calories. For someone eating 1,800–2,000 calories per day, this is about 45–50 grams per day.

The American Heart Association recommends even lower amounts:

- Women: no more than 25 grams per day
- Men: no more than 36 grams per day

Currently, the average American consumes about 65 grams of added sugar per day, or 13 percent of calories. A realistic goal is to reduce intake by one-quarter to one-half over time.



*Healthy eating patterns (including the DASH diet) have these characteristics:*

Predominantly Plant-focused Diet
Exercise & Stress Management
Calorie Balance/Healthy Weight
Long-term Habit

# Food That Loves *YOUR HEART BACK*

Eating heart-healthy doesn't have to mean the same old sad salad that's been prescribed forever. A meal plan built around dry greens, no toppings, and a bland "diet" dressing is basically an invitation to reach for indulgent cheat meals.

The good news? Heart-healthy food can be genuinely delicious when you pay attention to your ingredients. To make a meal heart-healthy, follow these simple guidelines:



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# Pasta Fagioli

This versatile vegan dish can be soupy or thickened into a hearty pasta by adjusting the pasta water. Try rotini or ziti instead of ditalini, and finish with nutritional yeast or parmesan (for a vegetarian option).



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## Ingredients

Makes: 4-6 servings

Prep: 5 mins

Cook: 1 hour

- 1-2 Tbsp olive oil, for sautéing the onion and garlic
- ½ small white or yellow onion, chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼-½ tsp crushed red pepper flakes
- 128-oz can plain tomato sauce
- ½ bunch fresh parsley, finely chopped
- 2 14-oz cans northern white beans, drained and rinsed
- ½ lb ditalini pasta
- Grated parmesan cheese or nutritional yeast if desired

## Preparation

- In a large pot or Dutch oven, heat the olive oil over medium heat and add the chopped onion along with a pinch of salt.
- Sauté until onion is translucent, about 5 minutes.
- Stir in the garlic and red pepper flakes and cook another minute or so, stirring constantly and taking care not to burn the garlic.
- Add the tomato sauce, parsley and beans.
- Reduce heat to low and simmer for 1 hour.
- Stir occasionally to keep from sticking or scorching.
- While the sauce is cooking, cook the ditalini pasta in lightly salted boiling water.
- Once the pasta is al dente, drain and reserve 2-3 cups pasta water.
- When ready to serve, add pasta to the tomato and bean sauce and thin it with pasta water.
- Add ½ cup at a time, stir and add more to reach your desired consistency



## Nutrition (per serving)

Calories: 371 | Total fat: 6 g | Saturated fat: 1 g | Sodium: 593 mg | Cholesterol: 0 mg  
Total carbs: 66 g | Fiber: 11 g | Sugars: 6 g | Protein: 17 g | Potassium: 1,129 mg

# THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE HEART AND MENTAL HEALTH



## What Is the Link Between Stress, Mental Health, and Heart Health?

Mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma do not just affect emotional well-being. They can also impact heart health. Research shows that long-term mental health challenges can lead to physical changes in the body that increase the risk of heart disease.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), prolonged stress, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may raise heart rate and blood pressure, reduce blood flow to the heart, and increase cortisol levels. Over time, these responses can contribute to calcium buildup in the arteries, metabolic disease, and heart disease.

Stress can also appear in other physical ways, including headaches, muscle or body aches, stomach pain, and skin rashes. The American Heart Association (AHA) notes that chronic stress may lower energy levels, disrupt sleep, and affect mood, memory, and concentration.

## What Can You Do?

Both the CDC and the American Heart Association recommend the following strategies to help manage stress and support both mental and heart health:

- Recognize signs of stress, mental health concerns, and heart disease
- Talk with your healthcare provider about symptoms or concerns
- Exercise regularly to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression
- Stay connected with friends and family
- Aim for seven to nine hours of sleep each night
- Practice relaxation techniques such as meditation, deep breathing, or listening to music
- Engage in hobbies you enjoy to help reduce stress and negative thought patterns

## Want to Learn More?

[CDC SOURCE](#)

[AMERICAN HEART  
ASSOCIATION SOURCE](#)



# Anxiety

Anxiety is our human response to difficult, challenging or dangerous situations. It helps us recognize worry and stress so that we can cope effectively.

## What does it look like?

When we become anxious, our body prepares itself for what we call a “fight or flight” response. When this happens, you may experience some of the following:

- Shortness of breath or a tight chest
- Dizziness or dry mouth
- Muscle aches & pain
- Shakiness or sweating
- Difficulty sleeping
- Butterflies in your stomach or feeling sick
- Getting “stuck” on specific thoughts
- Having a hard time focusing on a task

## Where does it come from?

Anxiety has actually helped us survive. It alerted us that something was dangerous, so we could escape it. Today, our responses don't always mean there's a physical threat, but it does give us information.

## Feeling anxious?

**STOP.** Take a moment to notice your thoughts.

- **Write it down.** Journal about what is the cause and why you feel anxious.
- **Talk it out.** Talk to a trusted friend/loved one.
- **Make a plan.** Find one or two realistic things to do to help you feel calm and/or address what is making you feel anxious.



Worry comes and goes as part of life. But when it becomes so overwhelming that it stops you from enjoying your everyday life, a professional can help.



Get confidential support:  
[unitedag.springhealth.com](http://unitedag.springhealth.com)

Are you in crisis?  
Call: 1-855-629-0554 & select Option 2

# MEMBER RESOURCES

Below are important links and information to help you understand and access your health benefits.

## UnitedAg Member Services

Member Services.....800.223.4590  
[memberservices@unitedag.org](mailto:memberservices@unitedag.org)

Member Advocate Service.....800.223.4590  
[memberadvocate@unitedag.org](mailto:memberadvocate@unitedag.org)

SMS/Text Messaging Service.....English: 949.594.0788  
Spanish: 949.524.4877



## UnitedAg Hours of Service

Monday - Friday.....6:30 am - 5:30 pm  
Saturday.....7:00 am - 3:30 pm

## Network Partners

UnitedAg Health & Wellness Clinics.....877.877.7981  
Blue Shield of California (Pre-Authorization).....800.541.6652  
Blue Shield National Coverage Network (Outside CA).....800.541.6652  
SAIN (Outside U.S.).....653.536.7800  
SmithRx (Pharmacy).....833.573.7797  
Specialty Pharmacy Service.....800.223.4590  
Teladoc (Telemedicine).....800.835.2362  
myStrength (Mental Health Care).....800.945.4355  
Spring Health (Mental Health Care).....855.629.0554  
First Dental Health (Dental).....800.334.7244  
VSP (Vision).....800.877.7195

## Helpful Links

### **HealthChats**

[unitedag.org/healthchats](http://unitedag.org/healthchats)

### **Member Health Portal**

[unitedag.org/healthportal](http://unitedag.org/healthportal)

### **Health & Wellness Clinics**

[ua.clinic](http://ua.clinic)

### **Network Partner Directories**

[unitedag.org/networks](http://unitedag.org/networks)

### **Quick Guide**

[unitedag.org/quickguide](http://unitedag.org/quickguide)

### **Summary Plan Description (SPD)**

English & Spanish:

[unitedag.org/spd](http://unitedag.org/spd)

## UPCOMING EVENTS

World Ag Expo:  
Women in Ag Networking Event  
February 12 | 12pm - 2pm  
Tulare, CA

UnitedAg 46th  
Annual Conference  
Wed - Thur, April 29 - April 30  
Paso Robles, CA

American Pistachio  
Annual Conference  
February 16 - 18 | Indian Wells, CA

AgSafe Conference  
February 17 - 19, | Monterey, CA



# *thank you to our* CONTRIBUTORS



Spring Health

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well—every month.

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# A Berry Healthy Valentine

PHOTOGRAPH BY CALIFORNIA STRAWBERRY COMMISSION



Show your heart some love. Pair strawberries with dark chocolate, yogurt, or enjoy them fresh as a simple, heart-healthy treat.

*Learn more by visiting:*  
[californiastrawberries.com/health-wellness](http://californiastrawberries.com/health-wellness)