

# HEALTHY EATING FOR THE HEART

**Productive Ageing Centre** **National Seniors Australia**

Healthy eating is important at any stage of life but it becomes more critical for disease prevention as you age. *Beth Scholes (Nutrition Adviser, Heart Foundation)*, a key speaker at the Productive Ageing Forum, discussed how healthy eating can play a major role in preventing heart disease, as well as many other diseases, and how making lifestyle changes can help you to enjoy life more.



Beth Scholes pointed out that heart disease is the largest single cause of death in Australia, killing approximately 24 000 people a year. To make matters worse, 1.4 million Australians live with a disability or burden that is a result of having cardiovascular disease. But the news is not all bad because 80% of heart disease is preventable.

You can make lifestyle changes that may help to reduce your risk of heart disease and your chance of having a heart attack. Of course, you can't change some things such as a family history of heart disease (called non-modifiable factors). But there are some things that you can change such as blood cholesterol levels, diet, body weight, physical activity or smoking (called modifiable factors). "Ninety per cent of Australians have at least one modifiable factor," Beth said.

## Diet and health

Healthy eating to prevent heart disease does not need to be difficult. Australians obtain one-third of their energy from "discretionary food", which includes cakes, muffins, pastries, alcohol, confectionery and soft drinks and flavoured water.

Alarmingly, approximately 90% of people are not getting the recommended daily amount of vegetables (according to the Victorian Department of Health in 2012).<sup>1</sup> Beth said simple changes you can make to your diet include:

- Increasing the amount of fruit and vegetables
- Eating fresh foods instead of processed foods
- Avoiding foods with saturated ('bad or unhealthy') fats and choosing food with healthier fats (e.g. avocado and oily fish)
- Choosing dairy products with low, reduced or no fat.

Beth also said that the new *Australian Dietary Guidelines* give you a good idea of what food to eat, with the information provided based on the best available scientific evidence. The guidelines suggest that you eat a variety of fresh, mostly plant-based, nutritious food and include fruit, vegetables and wholegrains in your diet. Limiting foods that contain saturated fat, added sugar and salt and alcohol can help to keep your heart and body in good shape.



<sup>1</sup> Victorian Government Department of Health, Victorian Health Monitor, 2012.

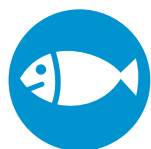
## Changing your diet

Beth said that there are a number of ways to change your diet. You can start slowly by replacing one food with a healthier choice. Variety is key for a nutritious diet, so include food from a wide range of sources.



### Healthy fats and oils

High levels of saturated fats may increase your risk of heart disease. Foods containing saturated fat should be limited and replaced with those containing monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fat (e.g. plant-based food, olive oil, nuts, avocado, fish). Most saturated fat comes from animal and dairy products. Beth also said that people should be aware of hidden saturated fat (e.g. palm oil), which is usually an ingredient in many processed foods.



### Fish

Fish is a great addition to a healthy diet and a good source of omega-3. Beth suggested that people eat oily fish 2–3 times a week. This can include sardines, canned salmon, blue-eye trevalla and some canned tuna. There are also plant sources of omega-3 such as walnuts, linseeds, and canola and soybean oil.



### Carbohydrates and sugar

Beth suggested that it is best to limit the number of high sugar drinks and refined carbohydrates (such as those found in cakes, biscuits, pastries and lollies) in your diet. The amount and the type of carbohydrate is also important to consider. Eat plenty of wholegrains, fruit and vegetables, legumes and lentils to reduce your risk of heart disease. These carbohydrates also contain fibre, which is important for a healthy heart.



### Salt

Australians eat too much salt, nearly 9g per day, Beth said. A high intake of salt has been linked to an increase in blood pressure, which in turn can cause problems with your heart. Decreasing the amount of salt you eat to 4–6 g per day (1–1.5 teaspoons per day) may help reduce your risk of heart problems. Beth suggested that when you cook you could add herbs and spices for flavour instead of salt and when buying products, look for those with low, reduced or no salt.



### Eggs

Beth said that people are concerned about eating eggs because they think that eating them will increase their blood cholesterol level. But eggs contain monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats and little saturated fat, so eating two eggs, twice a week will not cause problems for most people.



### Protein

Protein is an essential nutrient that is required for muscle growth. “As you get older, you need more because the body is doing more repair,” said Beth. As part of a healthy diet, a palm-sized portion of meat or a small portion of fish will give you an adequate amount of protein. Protein is also found in eggs, nuts, legumes, lentils and chickpeas.



### Heart Foundation Tick

The Heart Foundation Tick appears on certain foods that are available in the supermarket. Beth said that the tick does not necessarily indicate a healthy food but rather, it means that the Heart Foundation has endorsed the product as a healthier choice for that category of food. The food has been independently tested to ensure that it meets strict nutrition and labelling standards (such as a reduction in salt, a reduction in saturated fats and a reduction in calories).

Beth said that variety and eating things that we enjoy is very important. “Everything in moderation,” she said. “It’s all about balance”.

Information about looking after your heart and health is available on the Heart Health Information Line: 1300 36 27 87, or [heartfoundation.org.au](http://heartfoundation.org.au) or [heartattackfacts.org.au](http://heartattackfacts.org.au).

Information on the *Australian Dietary Guidelines* and helpful resources containing advice about the amount and kinds of foods that we need to eat for health and wellbeing are available at [eatforhealth.gov.au](http://eatforhealth.gov.au).

This fact sheet was developed using information provided by Beth Scholes (Nutrition Advisor, Heart Foundation) in her presentation on Healthy Eating for the Heart at the Productive Ageing Forum 2014.