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5 Heart-Smart Summer Foods

By Jo Cavallo

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Now is the perfect time to take advantage of the bounty of seasonal produce available at your local farmers' market or green grocer. Not only are the fruits and vegetables now in the marketplace good for lowering inflammation and cholesterol, both important for cardiovascular health, the nutrients they provide can also slow down age-related changes that can lead to a variety of chronic diseases, improve your skin and help you maintain a healthy weight.

To reap the full health benefits of summer's super foods, stick to a colorful selection of fruits and vegetables, including watermelon, carrots, mangoes, squash, broccoli, strawberries and blueberries. And don't forget to include lots of whole grains, nuts, fish and poultry in your menu.

Here are five heart-smart summer foods that pack a nutritional punch.

1. Tomatoes. An antioxidant food star, tomatoes make a delicious addition to any meal or as the main ingredient on the menu. Tomatoes are a good source of vitamins C, E, K and B6, as well as folate, magnesium, thiamin and niacin. But its real claim to fame is its abundance of lycopene, a carotenoid that's present in the skin, liver, adrenal glands, lungs, prostate and colon. According to the Mayo Clinic, studies are showing a correlation between the high intake of lycopene-containing foods, such as tomatoes, and reduced incidences of cardiovascular disease, cancer and macular degeneration.

2. Whole Grains. They play an important role in regulating blood pressure and heart health and are rich in fiber, vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and healthy fats. In addition to being heart protective, there's also evidence that whole grains protect against diabetes as well. Good sources of whole grains are whole-grain bread, high-fiber cereal with five or more grams of fiber a serving, whole-grain pasta, brown rice and ground flaxseed.

3. Fish. Certain types of fish are especially heart healthy because they contain omega-3 fatty acids, which can lower blood fats called triglycerides and reduce high blood pressure. To reap the most heart healthy benefits, choose cold-water fish such as salmon, mackerel and herring.

4. Legumes. Beans, peas and lentils are great in summer salads or as a side dish to a main course. They help regulate blood sugar levels and lower cholesterol and blood pressure.

5. Lean Meats and Poultry. To limit the amount of unhealthy fats in your diet, choose lean cuts of beef like sirloin, chuck and round; lean pork chops such as tenderloin; and poultry without the skin when you're planning your outdoor barbeque menu.

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mayoclinic.com/health/heart-healthy-diet/NU00196; www.nmh.org/nm/hearthealth

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