The Best Foods for a Healthy Heart

February is American Heart Month, a time in which nationally we work to improve awareness of and practice healthy heart habits. Heart disease is the leading cause of death for Americans, but there are many steps you can take to improve your heart health, one of those is nutrition. Health Initiatives dietitians Amber Johnson and Leah Galante have compiled a list of heart-healthy foods you can add to your shopping list this February to get a head start on adding variety to your eating choices and helping your heart.

Fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables: Fruits and vegetables are high in vitamins, minerals, and fiber that can help lower your risk of heart disease. Enjoy them on their own, or mixed into salads, stir-frys, or smoothies. Some specific highly nutritious foods to add to your routine are berries and spinach, which have heart-healthy phytonutrients (beneficial natural chemicals), and can be added to all kinds of dishes; asparagus, which is high in antioxidants and can help in lowering blood pressure; and vitamin c-filled tomatoes- even of the sun-dried variety. Be mindful of fried and breaded vegetables, as well as fruits canned in heavy syrup or with added sugar.

Whole grains: Whole grains are also great sources of nutrients and fiber, which can improve your blood cholesterol levels and help you feel fuller, longer. You can find whole grains in brown rice, barley, popcorn, and oatmeal, as well as whole-grain bread, cereal, and pasta. Cooking with whole-wheat flour instead of refined flour can also improve the heart-healthiness of your meals.

Lean proteins: Proteins are a vital part of your diet that help build bones and muscle, in addition to giving you the strength and energy you need for the day. These include fish, eggs, lean poultry, and meats, but it is also easily accessible if you eat a plant-based diet. Protein is found in soy products, such as tofu, soy milk, and miso. Nut butters, like peanut and almond butter, are healthy and convenient, and can be eaten on sandwiches or with fruit. Legumes, such as kidney, pinto, and black beans, can be great substitutes for meat in meals. Lima beans, chickpeas, split peas, and lentils are also great in soups and sauces.

Healthful fats: Unsaturated fats are a beneficial alternative to the saturated and trans fat you'll find in some processed foods. To better care for your heart, try to be mindful of your consumption of fats found in sources like butter, higher fat meats, and creamy sauces. Instead, focus on using olive and vegetable oils, or other plant-based sources of healthful fats. Nuts and seeds are rich in protein and antioxidants, and can be eaten on their own, mixed into other dishes, or ground up to add a healthful source of fats. Another delicious and healthful source is avocados, which are high in fiber, potassium, and vitamins, and linked to the prevention of multiple conditions. When discussing heart health it is also important to mention Omega-3 fatty acids, which have shown to be beneficial to heart, brain and eye health. Good food sources of Omega 3s include: fatty fish, such as salmon and tuna, vegetable oils, nuts, flaxseeds and flaxseed oil, and leafy vegetables.

Eating heart healthy foods is easier than you think! If you still think changing your habits might be difficult, check out these tips on eating healthily on a budget, or sign up for nutrition counseling with Georgia Tech Health Initiatives. If you're just looking for more inspiration, check out this fun list of healthy recipes. For more information, visit healthinitiatives.gatech.edu/nutrition.

<div align="center">Sources:</div>

https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/heart-disease/in-depth/heart-healthy-diet/art-20047702
https://health.clevelandclinic.org/15-heart-healthy-foods-to-work-into-your-diet/