Cardiovascular disease is still a leading cause of death worldwide, regardless of gender and ethnicity.

Basic risk factors include smoking, high blood pressure and high serum levels of low density lipoprotein (LDL or ‘bad’) cholesterol.

New research shows that transferring about 10% of calories from carbohydrates to either protein-rich foods (mainly from plant sources) or to monounsaturated fats (such as olive or canola oil) provides a major benefit to the heart.

**Omega-3 fatty acids**

This is an unsaturated fat that can reduce formation of blood clots and reduce LDL cholesterol.

Including foods that are rich or fortified with omega-3 fatty acids is a dietary intervention that has been shown to lower the risk of a heart attack and stroke in patients with atherosclerosis or diabetic heart disease.

Omega-3 fatty acids are found in plant foods such as flaxseed, wheat germ, canola oil, walnuts, green vegetables (spinach, broccoli and leafy greens) and marine foods (salmon, trout, tuna, herring and sardines).

**Soluble fibre**

When eaten regularly as part of a diet low in saturated fat, trans fatty acids (TFA) and cholesterol, soluble fibre has been shown to help lower blood cholesterol.

Foods high in soluble fibre include oat bran, oat meal, beans, peas, rice bran, barley, citrus fruits, strawberries and apple pulp.

**Antioxidants**

These neutralise free radicals, which increase risk of coronary heart disease since they encourage LDL cholesterol to adhere to artery walls.

The recognised dietary antioxidants are Vitamin C, Vitamin E, selenium and carotenoids. Recent studies have demonstrated that flavonoids found in fruits and vegetables may also act as antioxidants.
Flavonoids have aroused considerable interest recently because of their potential beneficial effects on human health. They have been reported to enable anti-viral, anti-allergic, anti-platelet, anti-inflammatory, anti-tumour and antioxidant activity.

Flavonoids are polyphenolic compounds that are categorised according to chemical structure – into flavonols, flavones, flavanones, isoflavones, catechins, anthocyanidins and chalcones.

Herbs high in antioxidant capacity include garden sage, marjoram, garden thyme, and rosemary. Adding these to salads as a seasoning may be a great healthy heart addition.

**Low fat and low salt**

Some fats – saturated and TFA – are more likely to cause heart disease. These are naturally present in animal-derived foods such as meat, milk, cheese and butter. TFA are also present in hydrogenated oils. Examine food labels for mention of ‘partially hydrogenated vegetable oil’ and ‘vegetable shortening’, and eat less of such products.

Reducing sodium intake can help lower blood pressure in some people. In turn, this can help lower the risk for heart disease. Much of the sodium comes from salt that is added to food at the table or that manufacturers add to products.

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This is an edited version of the article.