

# Foods Your Heart Will Love

## Top 10 Heart Healthy Choices

by Judith Fertig



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“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” Elizabeth Barrett Browning once penned this unforgettable line to her husband and fellow poet, Robert Browning.

Let us also count the ways to improve our loved ones’ heart health: Lower blood pressure. Modulate irregular heartbeats. Avoid plaque build-up in arteries. Improve blood flow to the heart.

We can love our hearts with 10 superfoods that just might make perfect ingredients for a Valentine’s Day meal, starting with dark chocolate.

**1 Cocoa powder.** Cacao’s flavanols lower blood pressure, reduce the risk of stroke and act as antioxidants to prevent inflammation. Dr. JoAnn E. Manson, a physician, doctor of public health and professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School affiliate Brigham and Women’s Hospital, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, confirms, “Between 400 and 900 milligrams (mg) a day of cocoa flavanols may favorably affect several mechanisms and pathways related to cardiovascular disease prevention.”

Not all chocolate is created equal. Manson recommends chocolate



with cocoa or cacao as the first ingredient, not sugar. She and her colleagues are currently conducting the Cocoa Supplement and Multivitamin Outcomes Study, a large-scale, randomized study of 18,000 U.S. men and women testing the benefits of ingesting 600 mg per day of cocoa flavanols.

**2 Raspberries.** Just one-half cup of berries a day can provide plenty of phytonutrients and antioxidants for decreasing inflammation and preventing heart disease, says Wendy Bazilian, a doctor of public health and registered dietitian in San Diego, and author of *The SuperFoodsRx Diet: Lose Weight with the Power of SuperNutrients*. “Whirl them into a breakfast smoothie, add them to a green salad or combine them with dark chocolate for a tasty, heart-healthy dessert,” she advises.



**3 Salmon.** Full of omega-3 fatty acids, wild-caught salmon (about two six-ounce weekly servings) helps reduce systemic inflammation and risk of developing atherosclerosis, hypertension and stroke, according to Dr. Josh Axe, of Nashville, Tennessee. Beyond prevention, omega-3s



in oily fish are also widely known to treat atherosclerosis, normalize heart rhythms and help lower blood pressure, cholesterol and triglyceride levels, as well as significantly lower the risk of stroke.

**4 Pumpkin seeds.** High in magnesium—about 764 mg per cup—roasted pumpkin seeds, or *pepitas*, top the list of heart-healthy nuts and seeds. Magnesium is an important electrolyte that helps the heart fire on all cylinders and not skip a beat. Improvements in lipid profiles can occur with a daily intake of 365 mg, or about a half-cup, of pepitas. Enjoy roasted pumpkin seeds as a snack or scatter them in a salad, bowl of chili or soup for a delicious crunch.



**5 Avocados.** Fresh avocados supply magnesium, plus they’re a good source of potassium, another electrolyte the heart needs for optimum functioning. “You probably know bananas and citrus fruits are top sources of potassium, but I like avocados because they also supply healthy fats,” says Dr. Stephen T. Sinatra, a board-certified cardiologist with the HeartMD Institute, in Manchester, Connecticut.



**6 Almonds.** Sinatra recommends a handful of almonds a day to raise HDL, a form of “good” cholesterol he likens to a “lipid garbage truck” that picks up oxidized “bad” LDL in the bloodstream and carries it to the liver for processing.



**7 Extra-Virgin Olive Oil.** Cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil with a high phenol content can help



lower blood pressure (via about two tablespoons daily), make more efficient and protective HDL cholesterol, and protect the inner lining of arteries.

## 8 **Beet Juice.**

A 2015 study in the journal

*Hypertension*

found that two daily eight-ounce glasses of



beet juice can help reduce high blood pressure. Beets contain a natural dietary nitrate found in previous studies to lower high blood pressure. Enjoy beet juice in smoothies, as a tart drink known as a “shrub” (beet juice with raspberry vinegar) or in soups like borscht.

## 9 **Garlic.** Allicin, the

sulfur compound that

gives garlic its dis-

tinctive aroma, helps

keep blood thin

and flowing opti-

mally, says Sinatra.

The freshest chopped

garlic offers the best benefits, according to

a study from the University of Connecticut

School of Medicine.



## 10 **Pomegranate.** Drinking

about one cup of pomegranate

juice a day

for three months can

improve blood flow

to the heart, re-

ports a study in the

*American Journal*

*of Cardiology.*



The ultimate reason of all to keep our hearts in good working order was voiced by Helen Keller: “The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.”

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