

Researchers Debunk “Hype” Around Controversial Food Trends

Cardiologists evaluate evidence for cardiovascular benefits of dairy, energy drinks, alcohol and more

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DENVER — Researchers at National Jewish Health and other institutions across the nation have evaluated the scientific evidence for and against the inclusion in a heart-healthy diet of several popular and trending foods. The members of the American College of Cardiology Nutrition & Lifestyle Workgroup of the Prevention of Cardiovascular Disease Council reviewed the scientific literature and consulted subject matter experts on dairy products, added sugar, legumes, coffee and tea, alcohol, energy drinks, mushrooms, fermented foods, omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin B12. They published their findings today in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*.

“The current nutritional recommendations show a heart-healthy diet is high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and nuts in moderation,” said Andrew Freeman, MD, FACC, director of cardiovascular prevention and wellness at National Jewish Health and the review’s lead author. “However, there are many food groups which can result in confusion for patients, including dairy, added sugar, coffee and alcohol.”

While low-fat **dairy** can significantly lower blood pressure, several studies have shown a link between dairy intake and increased LDL cholesterol, fractures and mortality. There is no clear consensus on dairy intake among experts, but after a review of multiple meta-analyses, the researchers determined that dairy should be consumed with caution, as it is unclear if there is benefit or harm, and, as it serves as a big source of saturated fat and salt in the US, should be limited if consumed at all.

Consumption of **added sugars** (table sugar and high fructose corn syrup) has been linked to increased risk for coronary heart disease, stroke and worsened atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease. The researchers strongly recommend that individuals eliminate added sugars from their diet as much as possible, including processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages such as regular soda, fruit drinks and sports drinks.

Legumes, which encompasses beans, chickpeas, lentils, peas and soybeans, have been shown to successfully reduce coronary heart disease and improve blood glucose, LDL-C, systolic blood pressure and weight.

“Legumes are affordable and a rich source of protein,” Freeman said. “We should be incorporating more beans and bean-dishes like hummus into our diets to promote heart health.”

The review also covered the following nutritional topics:

Coffee. Overall the habitual consumption of coffee is associated with lower risks of all-cause and cardiovascular mortality, and there is no association between coffee and hypertension development.

Tea. Both black and green tea consumption without added sugars, sweeteners, or milks and creams appear to be safe and even associated with improved cardiovascular health and blood lipids.

Alcohol. While the relationship between alcohol consumption and cardiovascular disease is complicated, low-to-moderate intake is associated with reduced risk of total cardiovascular disease. However, due to risks of falls, certain cancers and liver disease, the researchers don’t recommend that individuals consume alcohol for cardiovascular benefit.

Energy drinks. Increase blood pressure, platelet aggregation and arrhythmia risk.

Mushrooms. Have anti-inflammatory and antioxidant benefits.

Seaweed and fermented foods (i.e. kimchi). Emerging data suggest benefits for cardiovascular disease and risk factors.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids from marine or plant sources. Reduce cardiovascular disease risk and improve lipid profiles. Some environmental and toxin concerns about marine foods.

Vitamin B12. An essential nutrient that should be supplemented in those who are deficient.

Current evidence supports consumption of plant-based proteins, legumes, OM3s, mushrooms, coffee and tea without added sugars, low-to-moderate amounts of alcohol and fermented foods. The verdict on dairy as part of a heart-healthy diet is still out, and if consumed, full-fat dairy should be avoided.

“There is no perfect, one-size-fits-all dietary pattern for preventing heart disease,” Freeman said. “But, most of the evidence continues to reinforce that a predominantly plant-based diet lower in fat, added sugars, added salt, processed foods, and with limited if any animal products seem to be where the data is pointing us. It is important for clinicians to stay on top of rising food trends and current scientific evidence to provide meaningful and accurate nutritional advice for patients.”

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