

February 3, 2022

Release Date: February 9, 2022

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HEART HEALTHY TREATS FOR VALENTINE'S DAY

February is American Heart Month, so I thought this would be a great time to talk about heart healthy foods and recipes! However, before we jump into that, I want to acknowledge a recent change to this column. Regular readers might know that, up until last month, Deborah Rhoades wrote about a variety of fun and interesting things for this column. She recently retired, so for at least a little while, you will be hearing from me instead!

My name is Carrie Sorenson and I am also an Educator with the University of Maryland Extension (UME) Frederick County. In the time that I have been here, I have been able to work with and learn from Deborah, and I have truly enjoyed that time! As I begin writing this column, I will do my best to bring the same humor, positivity, energy, and quality nutrition information that Deborah shared with us for so many years.

To share just a little about myself, I started working with UME in 2017 as an Extension Educator, teaching healthy living, financial literacy, and wellness topics. You might see me out in the community teaching about credit scores, health insurance, budgeting, and more! But, I also have a Master's in Public Health and plan to use that background (as well as my love of all things food), as I write this column. I am really looking forward to it!

Getting back to our main topic for today, February is American Heart Month! As Valentine's Day approaches, stores and restaurants are all decked out in festive, heart shaped decorations. With hearts as far as the eye can see, it makes sense that this would be the month we are encouraged to pay attention to heart health and think about the things we can do to keep our hearts healthy. So, we are going to talk a little bit about heart healthy foods and even suggest some ideas for a heart healthy dinner for you and your sweetheart.

What makes a food heart healthy? There are many different factors, but according to Health.gov, following three tips can help steer you toward more heart healthy food choices. You can find these tips and a list of heart healthy foods to add to your shopping list here:

<https://health.gov/myhealthfinder/topics/health-conditions/heart-health/heart-healthy-foods-shopping-list>

1. Limit saturated fat. Often, saturated fats come from higher-fat meats, higher-fat dairy, and some oils. Ideally, we want to have less than 20 grams of saturated fat per day. Get into a habit of checking the Nutrition Facts label to see how much saturated fat is in a particular food.

2. Lower your sodium intake. Reducing the amount of sodium you have in a day can be a great way to protect your heart. More and more food manufacturers are making lower sodium versions of their products. You will see them labeled “low sodium” or “no salt added”. If you aren’t sure, remember that checking the Nutrition Facts label is a great way to see what is in your food!
3. Increase your fiber intake. Fiber is a key part of a healthy diet and you can find it in whole grain foods, fruits, and vegetables.

Keep reading for tips on adding more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to your diet!

These are great tips, but keep in mind that changing eating habits can be very challenging! Start small by focusing on one of these tips at a time. As you have more success with making swaps to your favorite recipes, you might find that you are more willing to try out other changes as well. If you want to try limiting salt, bring other herbs, spices, and flavors to your dishes. Salt is one of the main ways many people add flavor to food, so adding fresh herbs or exciting new spices can help make sure your food is still flavorful and enjoyable!

If you want to add more fiber to your diet, consider switching to whole grain foods in some of your favorite recipes. My husband loves macaroni and cheese, so when I make it, I use whole grain pasta. It’s a great way to get some extra fiber in a favorite comfort food. You could also consider adding some extra vegetables to a favorite dish. A few years ago, I found a recipe online for a crock-pot quinoa. It was a great weeknight dinner. I could start it in the morning so it would be ready when I got home from work. But, I noticed it didn’t have many vegetables, so I added extra diced onions and green peppers and topped it with diced tomatoes before serving. Recipes aren’t set in stone, often you can add extra vegetables without changing the flavor of the dish too much!

A great resource for those who are trying to eat (and live) in a more heart healthy way is the American Heart Association. You can find them online at <https://www.heart.org/en/>, where they have information on healthy eating, stress management, sleep, getting active, and more. They even have a whole section of their website dedicated to heart healthy recipes, which you can find at <https://recipes.heart.org/en/> . You can also visit Frederick County Public Libraries and check out one of the many American Heart Association cookbooks they have available.

So, if you are in the mood for a heart healthy meal for Valentine’s Day, check out some of these recipes from the American Heart Association. I picked an appetizer, main dish, and dessert for a wonderful (and heart healthy) three course meal!

APPETIZER: TOMATO AND ROASTED RED BELL PEPPER SOUP

Serves 6 (1 serving = 3/4 cup of soup)

14.5 ounces canned, no-salt-added, diced tomatoes (undrained)
1 3/4 cups fat-free, low-sodium chicken broth
1/2 cup chopped, roasted red bell peppers, drained if bottled
1 tablespoon dried basil (crumbled)
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano (crumbled)
1/8 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes (optional)
2 teaspoons olive oil (extra virgin preferred)
1/4 teaspoon sugar
1/8 teaspoon salt
1/4 cup chopped, fresh parsley

TOMATO AND ROASTED RED BELL PEPPER SOUP (continued)

In a medium saucepan, stir together the tomatoes with liquid, broth, roasted peppers, basil, oregano, and red pepper flakes. Bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat and simmer, covered, for 10 minutes. Remove from the heat. Stir in the oil, sugar, and salt. Serve sprinkled with the parsley. (Per serving 57 calories, 2g protein, 1g fiber)

Find this recipe and full nutrition information at: <https://recipes.heart.org/en/recipes/tomato-and-roasted-red-bell-pepper-soup>

MAIN DISH: SPINACH STUFFED BAKED SALMON

Serves 4 (1 serving = 3 ounces fish and 1/2 cup vegetables)

1 teaspoon olive oil (extra virgin preferred)
2 ounces fresh spinach
1 teaspoon grated lemon zest
1/4 cup chopped, roasted red bell peppers, rinsed and drained if bottled
1/4 cup fresh basil (coarsely chopped)
2 tablespoons chopped walnuts
Cooking spray
4 salmon fillets (about 4 ounces each), rinsed, patted dry
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard (lowest sodium available)
2 tablespoons plain dry bread crumbs, lowest sodium available
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano (crumbled)
1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
1/8 teaspoon pepper

In a large skillet, heat the oil over medium heat, swirling to coat the bottom. Cook the spinach and lemon zest for 2 minutes, or until the spinach is wilted, stirring constantly. Transfer to a medium bowl. Stir in the roasted peppers, basil, and walnuts. Let cool for 5 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Line a baking sheet with aluminum foil. Lightly spray the foil with cooking spray.

Cut a lengthwise slit in the side of each fillet to make a pocket for the stuffing. Be careful to not cut through to the other side. With a spoon or your fingers, carefully stuff a scant 1/2 cup spinach mixture into each fillet. Transfer to the baking sheet. With a pastry brush or spoon, spread the mustard over the fish.

In a small bowl, stir together the remaining ingredients. Sprinkle over the fish. Lightly spray the top with cooking spray.

Bake for 12 to 13 minutes, or until the fish is the desired doneness and the filling is heated through. (Per serving, 208 calories, 27 g protein, 1 g fiber)

Find this recipe and full nutrition information at: <https://recipes.heart.org/en/recipes/spinach-stuffed-baked-salmon>

DESSERT: CHOCOLATE AVOCADO-CHIA PUDDING

Serves 6 (1 serving = 1/2 cup)

2 medium very ripe avocados, peeled and pitted
1/2 cup unsweetened almond milk
1/4 cup unsweetened Dutch-process cocoa powder
1/4 cup fat-free, plain Greek yogurt
3 Medjool dates (pitted)
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
2 tablespoons chia seeds
1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons unsalted, chopped almonds or walnuts (optional)

In a food processor or blender, process all the ingredients except the almonds until smooth. Transfer the pudding to serving dishes. Cover and refrigerate for at least 1 hour to allow the chia seeds to thicken.

Just before serving, sprinkle with the almonds if desired. (Per serving 129 calories, 3g protein, 5g fiber)

Find this recipe and full nutrition information at: <https://recipes.heart.org/en/recipes/chocolate-avocado-chia-pudding>

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