The heart of the matter: simple dietary changes for better health

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WHEN we eat healthy food, we feel healthy. But why is this? How does the food we put in our body have such a huge effect on how we function from day-to-day?

According to the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa, 80% of cardiovascular disease can be prevented by leading a healthy lifestyle through a balanced diet and exercise routine.

Registered dietitian Yuri Bhaga says that the key drivers in reducing risk lie in the choices we make in daily life, namely nutrition, exercise, tobacco and alcohol use and managing comorbidities such as diabetes, elevated cholesterol, obesity and family history.

Bhaga says nutrition plays a major role in improving our overall health, dietary habits, food choices and the nutritional quality of what we eat has a profound impact. However, with all the information out there, it's easy to heed the wrong advice.

Below, Bhaga shares ways we may unknowingly be increasing our risk for poor heart health through our diet and what we can do instead.

Salt

There is long-standing evidence that shows that excessive sodium intake is linked to a higher incidence of heart disease. Salt is directly related to increased blood pressure which may lead to hypertension. One of the most cost-effective measures identified by the World Health Organisation to improve population health outcomes is salt reduction.

Saturated fats

These fats are usually solid at room temperature, found in butter, animal meats and high-fat dairy products. Saturated fats should be kept to a minimum in our diet and ideally contribute to only 10% of our daily energy intake. Coconut oil

Coconut oil has become very popular due to supposed health benefits, however, it is high in saturated fats – unlike other heart-healthy plant oils. Processed foods

Convenience foods and take-aways are prepared using high-fat and high-sodium ingredients and prepared using unhealthy cooking methods. Consuming these regularly is bad for overall health and will increase the risk of developing health-related diseases.

What you can do instead: Eat fruits

Up your fruit, vegetable and whole-grain intake. This will ensure you are getting a variety of vitamins and minerals as well as fibre which has a cardio-protective effect in high-risk individuals.

Choose

Choose unsaturated fats such as sunflower or olive oil. Look for ways to reduce the intake of high-fat meats and include more plant-based proteins such as legumes and beans in your diet.

unsaturated fats Opt for homemade

If you are making your meals, you can determine exactly what and how much of each ingredient goes into your meal as well as the quality of that meal.

Use healthier cooking methods

Skip the deep fry and go for grilling, baking, pan-searing, steaming or air frying.