

NATURAL HEALTH

Damage Control: The 6 Best Natural Supplements To Protect Against Heart Disease, Cholesterol, and High Blood Pressure

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You know, of course, that the most effective way to keep your heart in top shape is a balanced diet and regular exercise. But if you're like most people, you've got a heap of good intentions, a head of broccoli wilting in the crisper, and a set of weights languishing under the bed. The good news: Supplements like fish oil, herbs, and multivitamins can help fill in the nutritional and exercise gaps and fortify your heart's health. "The vitamins, minerals, and nutrients you get from supplements can absolutely help keep the heart going strong," says Jim Roberts, M.D., a cardiologist in Toledo, Ohio, and coauthor of *Reverse Heart Disease Now* (Wiley, 2008). But, he warns, don't wait until your heart calls for help. "If you start early and stay ahead of the damage, you'll be much better off." That said, it's also never too late to start taking natural supplements for your most vital organ. Mark Houston, M.D., director of the Hypertension Institute in Nashville and author of *What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Hypertension* (Grand Central Publishing, 2003), advises, "Supplements can not only prevent heart disease, but even reverse damage that's already been done."

We did some homework to find out exactly which supplements you should be taking-and provided this cheat sheet of the very best ones for overall heart health, including those most effective for high blood pressure and cholesterol.

(Note: While the following supplements are deemed safe and effective, it's important to speak to your doctor before launching any supplement regimen.)

Overall Coverage

Fish Oil

In the 1970s, researchers in Denmark noticed something curious: Inuit in Greenland ate 70 grams of fat a day-mostly from fish, seals, and whales-and when food was abundant, the fat fest could hit a belly-clutching 600 g. (By comparison, Americans who eat 2,000 calories a day are told not to consume more than 67 g of fat.) Yet only 3.5 percent of Inuit died of heart disease. Today, everyone knows the secret in the Inuit's sauce was fish oil, rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Twenty-five years later, scientists are still slack-jawed over the oil's healing powers.

Omega power

Omega-3s can put the kibosh on high blood pressure and tamp down triglycerides, a group of damaging fats in the blood. They can also slice your overall odds of keeling over from heart disease by more than 30 percent. A recent meta-analysis-the combining of several research studies for enhanced accuracy and clarity-found that a person's risk of dying from heart disease drops by 7 percent per 20 g of omega-3- rich fish consumed (up to five servings a week).

How it works

How does swallowing fat fight a disease that can be caused by eating *too much* fat? Because fish oil's omega-3s don't act like fat in the body; they act like hormones, explains Christopher Gardner, Ph.D., a scientist at the Stanford Prevention Research Center at the Stanford School of Medicine in Palo Alto, Calif. Fat is fuel, period. But omega-3s, like hormones, help to regulate blood pressure, blood sugar levels, and inflammation-all key factors in heart disease. Although scientists are still figuring out exactly how fish oil works its magic, they do know that omega-3s

interfere with the body's ability to whip up a class of chemicals that raise and lower inflammation levels.

And you don't need to relocate to Greenland, load up on fish fillets, or worry about mercury levels to cash in. Just 3 g a day of fish oil supplements- impurities like mercury are filtered out during processing- can boost heart health.

Bottom line

Fish oil is remarkably safe and effective. "Every American should take fish oil," advises Roberts. "You'd be nuts not to."

Buying guide

When choosing a fish oil supplement, look for one that delivers both eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA)-the two omega- 3s found in fish. Products that make the grade include Nordic Naturals, Nature's Bounty, and Res-Q 1250.

Dosage

At least 1 g per day. To take aim at triglycerides, shoot for 2 to 4 g daily. The only caveat is that fish oil thins the blood, so talk with your doctor if you already take a blood-thinning drug such as Coumadin or a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory like ibuprofen.

Best For Lowering Cholesterol

Psyllium

Cholesterol is a numbers game. The higher the amount of cholesterol in your blood, the higher your risk of heart damage. Steering clear of cholesterol-rich foods like whole-milk ice cream and butter is a place to start, but genes partly determine how deftly your body juggles its cholesterol. Whether your diet or your parents are working against you, psyllium supplements can help you slash cholesterol levels.

How it works

Psyllium is a soluble fiber made from the husks of psyllium seeds. Inside the gut, it gloms onto bile acids, which are made with cholesterol. After psyllium latches onto the bile, the entire compound is eliminated. When the gut realizes it's fresh out of bile, it grabs cholesterol out of the blood to make more- and cholesterol levels take a nosedive.

Recently, the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* published a meta-analysis of eight studies comparing psyllium's cholesterol-lowering skills with the ability of a placebo. Researchers found that 10.2 g of psyllium per day lowered bad (LDL) cholesterol by an impressive 7 percent. Among supplements studied for lowering cholesterol, psyllium is on the best footing, says Deepak Bhatt, M.D., a cardiologist and professor of medicine at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. "Fiber supplements have low potential for harm and high potential for benefits."

Who it can help

Psyllium may also be a boon to folks taking conventional heart medicines. In a study published in 2005 in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, researchers divided people with high cholesterol into two groups. One set saw a 29 percent drop in their LDL cholesterol levels on 10 milligrams of Zocor, a popular statin. But the second crowd used a combo of Zocor (10 mg) and psyllium (15 g) and saw their LDL levels plummet by 36 percent-the equivalent of taking twice as much Zocor.

Buying guide

Look for psyllium capsules in the supplement aisle or in drinkable forms such as Metamucil and Serutan.

Dosage

10 g a day, taken with meals, when bile acids are abundant. Psyllium has an excellent safety record, but it does bulk up the stool, so wash it down with at least 8 ounces of water.

Plant Stanol & Sterol Esters

Plant stanols and sterols-both plant membranes- fight high cholesterol with a two-pronged approach. First, they monkey with the body's ability to absorb the fatty stuff from food. Second, they help escort cholesterol found in biological juices out of the body. More than a dozen studies show the kissing cousins can lower LDL cholesterol by as much as 15 percent. Thanks to a long history and a spotless safety record, Gardner gives them the thumbs-up. "Plant sterols clearly lower cholesterol," he says.

Buying guide

They are available as supplements and are mixed with vegetable oil for use in functional foods such as spreads, salad dressings, and low-fat yogurt. Popular products include Take Control, a margarine spread, and its competitor Benecol.

Dosage

1.3 g of plant sterols per day-the equivalent of 1 to 2 tablespoons of Take Control. Or aim for 3.4 g of plant stanol esters, found in 4 tablespoons of Benecol. When it comes to other functional foods and supplements, look to the label for guidance.

Best For Lowering Blood Pressure

CoQ10

Coenzyme Q10 (CoQ10 for short) gooses every cell in the body into functioning at its peak. Cells that make up high-energy organs like the heart require more CoQ10 than cells in less-hardworking parts of the body like the fingernails. Although your body makes its own CoQ10 supply, reserves dwindle as you age, and heart disease takes an extra toll. High blood pressure depletes CoQ10 stores, making the heart weaker, so the vicious cycle continues. But you can boost your heart's stash of energy by supplementing with CoQ10.

In a 2007 meta-analysis published in the *Journal of Human Hypertension*, scientists distilled the evidence from 12 CoQ10 studies and found a significant decrease in high blood pressure among volunteers who took the supplement. "Anyone who has any form of heart disease stands to benefit from CoQ10," says Roberts. "It helps to meet the needs of an overworked heart."

Here's another case for combining conventional and complementary medicine: While statins can save lives, the drugs impede the body's ability to make CoQ10. "If you take a statin, it will lower your CoQ10 level by 50 percent," says Roberts. "However, if you take CoQ10 with your statin, you'll get the benefit of the drug without any of the downside."

Buying guide

Since it needs fat in order to be absorbed into the body, CoQ10 is best taken either with food or in an oil-based softgel, like Nature Made's CoQ10 or CoQ-Zyme 30 from Biotics Research, rather than as a dry tablet.

Dosage

30 to 300 mg daily.

Carnitine

Carnitine is an amino acid that helps turn fat into fuel by pulling fat molecules out of the bloodstream and ushering them into cells, where they are burned. Carnitine is vital for heart health; whereas most muscles like to burn sugar, the heart prefers to burn fat. And while a healthy body makes enough carnitine to meet the heart's needs, when the heart is weakened, supplemental carnitine can ferry extra fuel to the hardworking muscle.

In studies, carnitine has been used with conventional drug therapy to ameliorate symptoms of chest pain, hardening of the arteries, and congestive heart failure. But Roberts also recommends

it to his patients with high blood pressure. "Both CoQ10 and carnitine are necessary to accommodate the increased demand of the heart under stress," he says.

Buying guide

To get measurable benefits, try a supplement like Biotics Research L-Carnitine Powder or liquid L-Carnitine from Nature's Answer.

Dosage

2 to 4 g of L-Carnitine a day for best results.