

Pains of the Heart

By Allison Tannis, BSc., MSc.

Heart disease accounts for the death of more Canadians than any other disease. Annually, cardiovascular disease accounts for about 79,400 deaths in Canada. Yet, Canadians do not understand, or perhaps refuse to believe, the potentially life saving power of food. These Canadians included my father.

In his bigger than life way, my father was more full of life than anyone I knew. His love for laughter was contagious. However, perhaps it was his love for life that caused him to refuse nutritional advice when he had his first heart attack, and continued to maintain an annihilating diet. He was only 47 when he died of a second heart attack.

Is it the fear of admitting we might not be invincible? Or, is it simply that Canadian's do not believe that food truly has healing powers? Which ever it is, my father's ultimate death from cardiovascular disease may have been prevented if he only took the time to understand the power of food. Therefore, let's take the time to learn about food and its heart healthy benefits, because no one should have to die from heart disease when we know of so many ways to help nourish the heart to health.

In particular, it appears that fruits and vegetables are underestimated. In a small study reported in the American Journal of Health Promotion, researchers found that cardiac patients appeared to reduce their dietary fat; however, they made no progress toward eating five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

This is difficult to understand, particularly in a time when two large studies have been published proclaiming the heart healthy abilities of fruits and vegetables. For example, results from the Kuopio Ischaemic Heart Disease Risk Factor Study were reported in the Journal of Nutrition in 2003. This study of 1950 men noted that a high fruit, berry and vegetable intake was associated with reduced risk of mortality.

The Cardio2000 study has also just recently been published. This large study of over 1800 people in Greece reveled subjects who ate five or more fruits a day had a 72% lower relative risk of cardiac disease than those who consumed less than one serving a day.

Therefore, it appears conclusive that fruit and vegetable consumption reduces the risk of heart disease. But, how is it that fruits and vegetables aid the heart? There are three major factors: antioxidants, fiber and folate.

Antioxidants are able to reduce oxidative damage to tissue. This is important as free radicals can damage cell that maintain the integrity of blood vessels and heart valves. Antioxidants are also thought to block the tendency of LDL cholesterol to stick to arterial walls, which causes atherosclerosis.

Fruits and vegetables contain insoluble fibre which does not dissolve in water, and therefore can be found in the intestine. Here, fibre is able to trap cholesterol, rendering it unavailable for absorption across the intestinal wall and into the blood stream. Therefore, dietary fibre can help reduce cholesterol levels in the body.

A major risk factor in heart disease is the amino acid, homocysteine. Although there are over 285 risk factors for heart disease, homocysteine is gaining recognition as one of great concern as it may cause atherosclerosis. Folate, which is found in many fruits and vegetables, lowers homocysteine levels by encouraging the remethylation process of the homocysteine pathway.

Heart disease need not shorten the lives of more Canadians. Fruits and vegetables, combined with a heart healthy diet that is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, fibre and is low in trans fats may help prevent and treat heart disease. Empower yourself with knowledge, and enjoy a happy, heart healthy life.