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NUTRITION

Eating smart key to a healthy heart

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To have a healthy heart, there are a few simple things you must put into practice. "Exercise and a healthy diet are very important," says cardiologist Romualdo Seguro, director of the Heart Institute at the Palmetto General Hospital.

High cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes are risk factors directly linked to heart diseases and the way they are handled is directly related to a healthy lifestyle. Also, alcohol consumption and smoking are dangerous.

To take care of your heart, "it is essential to keep a low-fat diet, especially in saturated fat and transfat," says nutritionist Malena Perdomo, spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. Saturated fat is found in butter and you can find transfat in processed foods such as French fries and crackers. Cheese also contains fat, which is why you should eat it in moderate portions. "A daily ounce of cheese is an adequate portion," she says.

The danger with fat, especially saturated and transfat, is that it raises your cholesterol. In time, cholesterol builds up, hardens the arteries and blocks the bloodstream.

High cholesterol shows no symptoms and the only way to know it is through blood tests. "Everyone should have an annual checkup to detect any problem," Seguro says.

"You have to also limit the consumption of meat," especially red meat, says Perdomo. Before eating it, remove all the fat and skin and avoid cooking or frying it in oil or lard. Olive oil is the healthiest, though with moderation.

When shopping for food, read the labels to know the percentages of fat and the



STOCK UP ON FRUITS AND VEGGIES: To take care of your heart, it's important to maintain a diet that's high in fiber and nutrients. To avoid compulsive shopping, don't go to the market when you're hungry.

type of fat you are consuming. Quantities of other products such as sodium are also shown. People with high blood pressure should be careful with the amount of sodium they consume.

"Sodium causes the body to retain fluid and thickens the blood," says Marta Montenegro, exercise physiologist specialized in cardiovascular rehabilitation and a spokeswoman for the American Heart Association.

Instead of salt, she suggests you use spices to add flavor to your food. Replace salt with meals rich in omega 3 such as fish, sunflower seeds and nuts.

"Consume fiber to help you cleanse your stomach," Perdomo says. Oatmeal, whole cereals, vegetables and fruits "make a person feel full."

People with diabetes

must monitor their blood sugar levels constantly. With time, when these are very high, they end up affecting the artery walls, making it easier for plaques to adhere to them. If a person does not take care of himself, arteries begin to get blocked, interrupting normal bloodstream. On the other hand, sugar contributes to obesity. Thus, it is a good idea to drink more water and less juice and canned beverages.

"In some cases, heart diseases have a hereditary component," but if you take care of yourself, you can reduce the possibility of having serious complications, says Seguro.

Although you may keep a good diet, you must not forget some external factors. "Stress and lack of sleep affect cardiovascular health," Montenegro says. "Chronic

Herb mix (to replace salt)

Quarter-cup of pepper
2 tablespoons of paprika
2 teaspoons of oregano
1 teaspoon of garlic powder
1 teaspoon of black pepper
Half-teaspoon of red pepper
Half-teaspoon of dry mustard

Fill up your salt dispenser with this herb mix.

stress makes your body feel constantly threatened and, in response, your blood pressure, cortisone and adrenaline go up." All of this helps fat to accumulate and body weight to increase. "To gain weight every year is a red flag," Perdomo says.

The American Heart Association recommends 30 minutes of physical activity every day to stay in shape and maintain a healthy heart. There are other benefits to being active: relax-

ation, a lowered blood pressure, improved cholesterol levels.

"Physical activity motivates you to eat better and helps the body control the calories going in and out," Perdomo says.

Montenegro says that "it is not how much time you exercise, but how consistently." In other words, it is better to do a little every day than to do one full hour only one day of the week.