We all know that saturated fat, trans fats and obesity contribute to heart disease and stroke. But here are a few odds and ends that you may not have tied to the disease.

**Omega 3 fatty acids**  You may have heard fish oils are good for your heart. Did you know there are 3 different kinds of omega 3s? DHA and EPA, found in fish, support improved ventricular function. ALA is found in plants like algae, flax and hemp hearts. ALA is essential (you must get it in your diet) from which you make small amounts (5-20%) of DHA and EPA. You may need to supplement but talk to your doctor before supplementing.

**Smoke rings** Not only is smoking highly addictive but it’s dangerous to your heart. Many studies have shown that smoking increases fatty build up in the arteries and is a major contributing factor to deaths from cardiovascular incidents (heart attacks). It increases blood pressure and clots, decreases protective HDL cholesterol and reduces oxygenation of blood to every cell. It not only affects you, but YOUR second hand smoke is also linked to heart disease IN OTHERS. If you haven't quit yet, at least avoid smoking around others.

**“There are no strings on me”, says Pistachio** A small handful of pistachio nuts may help prevent arteries from clogging and reduce cholesterol. They're high in lutein, beta-carotene and Vitamin E (antioxidants). Other heart healthy nuts include walnuts and almonds. And try flax, hemp, chia, pumpkin and sunflower seeds.

**Belly Fat Pulls the Strings** When adults overeat, fat cells in the belly get larger and become more active. Belly fat cells release hormones that increase your risk for heart disease and diabetes. Once those fat cells grow to capacity, you create more fat cells, which can then grow larger, releasing more harmful hormones, et cetera et cetera.

**Poly whaty?** Polyphenols have been in the news the past few years because of their connection to the red wine studies, coffee and now even chocolate, demonstrating heart health benefits. Polyphenols are antioxidants that may keep your LDL cholesterol from oxidizing (“rusting” in your arteries), protecting you from developing plaque. Polyphenols are also found in dark fruits, mostly berries like strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and red grapes so throw them into your cereal, yogurt and salads daily.
**D is for Dozens of Good Things**  For many years, we knew that Vitamin D was important for the absorption of calcium into our bones. New research is showing Vitamin D is not a vitamin at all, but more like a hormone, that plays a role in prevention of many diseases. We can make vitamin D through our skin with a process involving direct sunlight and cholesterol. But in Northern latitudes (like ours here), even summer rays are not direct enough to manufacture vitamin D. Some supplementation is recommended but have your doctor test you first to know the recommended dose. Since it is a fat-soluble vitamin, overdoses can become toxic. Food sources include milk, eggs, shitaki mushrooms and fatty fish like salmon, mackerel and sardines (also high in Omega 3s).

**How Sweet it Isn’t**  Researchers with the NHANES study demonstrated that high sugar intake was associated with increased LDL cholesterol and reduced HDL (both are tugs in the WRONG direction). Higher sugar intake was also associated with raised Triglycerides. Some researches believe sugar may damage artery walls leading to inflammation and plaque build up.

**Egg on our Faces**  Years ago, health officials recommended we cut eggs from our diets because they contribute to high cholesterol and therefore heart disease. But eggs are not as damaging as previously believed and actually contain many healthful nutrients beneficial to your heart (the near perfect protein, B12, Vitamin D, Riboflavin, folate and lutein and zeaxanthin for your eyes).

**Tied in Knots**  Stress and tension contribute to many chronic conditions, heart disease being only one. The stress response, (AKA “Fight or Flight”) releases hormones like adrenalin and cortisol that speed up the heart, increase blood pressure, mobilize blood sugars and cholesterol to prepare the body to fight or run from danger. But when stimulated daily, this causes constant inflammation, depressed immunity and wound healing, depressed thyroid function and fat deposition, especially around the dangerous mid-section!

**A Weighty Subject**  BMI stands for Body Mass Index and is used as an indicator of health since it pertains to weight, especially that unhealthy fat around your midsection. Knowing your BMI can be one indicator whether or not you are at risk for heart disease. Calculate yours at the American Heart Association website www.americanheart.org.

**Oh the pressure**  High blood pressure (AKA hypertension) is called the “Silent Killer” because there are no symptoms. Hypertension can lead to hardening and thickening of the arteries and heart failure. Salt (AKA sodium) can be a contributing factor to high blood pressure and artery damage. Salt recommendations have been recently reduced from 2300 mg/day (less than one teaspoon) to a range between 1500-2300 mg/day. Avoid processed foods, fast foods and pre-packaged goods, since sodium is a preservative that lengthens shelf life. Oh, and hide the salt shaker.

**NO your Greens**  NO is short for Nitric Oxide, a powerful vasodialator that lowers blood pressure, improves blood flow, stops inflammation and plaque formation, and prevents heart attack and stroke. NO is formed from two amino acids found in plant foods like greens, grains and watermelon. Chewing salad greens helps produce NO so eat rather than juice your veggies.

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