

Heart health



The Australian Dietary Guidelines highlight the importance of including milk, cheese, and yoghurt in a balanced diet. These foods can help protect against heart disease, stroke, and reduce the risk of high blood pressure.

Heart disease in Australia

One in six Australians has heart disease, which is the leading cause of death in Australia.¹ Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a term used to describe all diseases of the heart and blood vessels. Coronary heart disease (which includes heart attacks and angina) and stroke are common forms of CVD. In terms of lives lost and health spending, CVD is still considered to be Australia's most costly disease.²

Risk factors for heart disease

There are a number of risk factors associated with developing CVD.³ Some risk factors like increasing age, male gender and family history of premature CVD cannot be changed. Other risk factors can be addressed, including excess weight, physical inactivity, an unhealthy diet, smoking and excessive alcohol consumption.

High blood pressure (hypertension) and high blood cholesterol are two other major risk factors for CVD.⁴ One in three Australian adults has either hypertension ($\geq 140/90$ mmHg) or high cholesterol (≥ 5.5 mmol/L).⁵ The good news is these risk factors can also be addressed through a healthy lifestyle.

Evidence for dairy and improved heart health

Dairy foods have long been known for their role in bone health. The Australian Dietary Guidelines also highlight the importance of including milk, cheese, and yoghurt to reduce heart disease risk. Milk, cheese and yoghurt are also recognised for reducing the risk of stroke, hypertension and type 2 diabetes.⁶

A recent meta-analysis found dairy consumption reduced the risk of CVD by 12 per cent and stroke by 13 per cent.⁷ These findings were based on 22 studies with over 900,000 participants.

However, most Australians aren't eating enough milk, cheese and yoghurt and are missing out on the health benefits. Around nine in 10 Australian adults need to increase dairy intake to meet the Australian Dietary Guidelines.⁸

Dairy linked to a reduced risk of hypertension

Studies have shown consuming three daily serves of milk, cheese and yoghurt is linked to a reduced risk of hypertension. The DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet is widely recommended for prevention and management of hypertension. This diet is characterised by a high intake of fruits and vegetables, high in reduced-fat dairy and reduced sodium intake. Evidence has shown consumption of the DASH diet is favourable for heart health, including CVD and stroke.^{9, 10, 11} The DASH diet focuses on reduced-fat dairy, but a recent trial showed similar blood pressure reductions with regular-fat dairy.¹² These findings don't just apply to adults. A recent study found that regular and reduced-fat dairy consumption in adolescents was linked to lower blood pressure.¹³

The National Heart Foundation of Australia has removed their restriction for healthy Australians on eating regular-fat milk, cheese and yoghurt. After reviewing the evidence, they concluded regular-fat dairy has a neutral effect on heart disease risk and stroke.¹⁴

Cheese is not associated with increased cholesterol

The fat in dairy products has a reputation for being bad for heart health and cholesterol levels. This is why some health professionals recommend limiting higher-fat dairy, like cheese, in the diet. However, studies show people who consume milk, yoghurt, and cheese (even regular-fat varieties) are less likely to have heart disease. Danish researchers compared the effect of cheese and butter on cholesterol levels. They found cheese did not increase low-density lipoprotein (LDL) or total cholesterol. Participants ate 140g of cheese daily, much more than the Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend.¹⁵ A recent meta-analysis showed hard cheese lowered total cholesterol by 5 per cent compared to butter.¹⁶

The dairy matrix and heart health

The exact reason the dairy food group can help to prevent and manage heart health is still being explored. Research suggests the unique combination of minerals and proteins in these foods play a major role. Milk, cheese, and yoghurt contain essential nutrients and bioactive substances, like casein and whey, which may reduce cardiovascular disease risk. For example, calcium and potassium particularly from dairy (as opposed to other sources) may be beneficial to those with high blood pressure. Also, cheese's high calcium content may increase faecal fat excretion, benefiting cholesterol levels.¹⁷ It is thought that dairy food components may act synergistically. Therefore, it is important to consider the entire food matrix as opposed to isolated nutrients.

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