myHealth CONNECTIONS
PROMOTING HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

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Wellness Wednesdays

FEBRUARY, 2025 WEEK 1

FROM THE HEART: Heart-Healthy Recipes & Tips

Valentine's Day is a time to celebrate and evoke love! From the meals you prepare to the habits you embrace, investing in heart health is one of the greatest acts of self-love. In this section, we will focus on the role nutrition plays in keeping hearts healthy and strong, sharing delicious recipes, particularly perfect for Valentine's Day and exploring the correlation between your oral health and heart health.

Start with small, meaningful changes in your diet and daily routine. Even small steps lead to large consequential impact on your well-being and overall health.

FOODS TO EMBRACE AND AVOID

Choosing the right foods is one of the simplest ways to keep your heart strong. A balanced diet supports healthy cholesterol levels, regulates blood pressure, and reduces inflammation. Here's how to make your plate heart-friendly:

Enjoy these:

- **Leafy greens** like kale, spinach, and arugula are packed with antioxidants and essential vitamins.
- **Fatty fish** like salmon and mackerel are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which reduce inflammation and lower heart disease risk.
- **Blueberries, strawberries, and raspberries** are antioxidant powerhouses.
- **Dark chocolate** (70% or higher), in moderation, can improve blood flow and reduce blood pressure.
- **Whole grains** like brown rice, quinoa, and oats help regulate cholesterol levels.

Limit these:

- **Refined carbs** like white bread, pastries, and sugary cereals can lead to blood sugar spikes.
- **Processed meats** that are high in sodium and saturated fats can increase cholesterol levels.
- **Fried foods** are often laden with unhealthy fats and extra calories.

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We've hyperlinked resources you may want to access. Just hover and click!

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RECIPES FOR WELLNESS

Celebrate Valentine's Day with meals that show your heart some love. These recipes are as tasty as they are nutritious:

Beet & Goat Cheese Salad

Ingredients

- 4 medium beets, roasted and sliced
- 4 cups arugula or mixed greens
- ½ cup goat cheese, crumbled
- ¼ cup walnuts, toasted
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- 1 teaspoon honey
- Salt and pepper to taste

Instructions: Preheat your oven to 400°F (200°C). Wrap each beet in aluminum foil and roast for 40-50 minutes until tender. Let them cool, peel, and slice. In a small bowl, whisk together olive oil, balsamic vinegar, honey, salt, and pepper. Toss roasted beets, arugula, goat cheese, and walnuts with the vinaigrette. Beets are rich in nitrates, which help lower blood pressure. It's a win-win!

Honey-Glazed Salmon

Ingredients

- 4 salmon fillets (4-6 ounces each)
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Lemon wedges (for serving)

Instructions: Preheat your oven to 375°F (190°C) and line a baking sheet with parchment paper. In a small bowl, mix honey, Dijon mustard, olive oil, garlic powder, salt, and pepper. Place the salmon fillets on the baking sheet and brush the glaze evenly over each fillet. Bake for 12-15 minutes, or until the salmon flakes easily with a fork. Serve with steamed broccoli and quinoa for a balanced meal.

Dark Chocolate Avacado Mousse

Ingredients

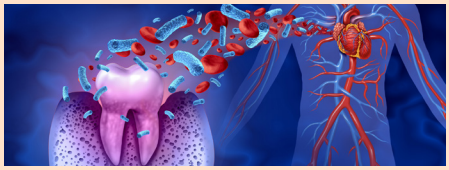
- 2 ripe avocados, peeled and pitted
- ½ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- ½ cup dark chocolate (70% or higher), melted and slightly cooled
- ¼ cup honey or maple syrup (adjust to taste)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt
- Fresh berries (optional, for garnish)

Instructions: In a blender or food processor, combine avocados, cocoa powder, melted dark chocolate, honey, vanilla extract, and salt. Blend until smooth and creamy. Taste and adjust sweetness if needed by adding more honey or maple syrup. Spoon the mousse into serving bowls and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes to set. Garnish with fresh berries if desired before serving.

For more ideas like these, check out BCBSIL's Connect Community recipe book and the "ask a question" tool for personalized guidance.

ORAL HEALTH AND YOUR HEART:

Did you know that caring for your teeth and gums is essential for heart health? After you've finished your healthy, nutritious meals from the recipes above, it's time to zone in on caring for your oral health. Research shows a strong link between oral hygiene and cardiovascular health. Gum disease specifically can lead to inflammation, which may increase the risk of heart disease. To protect both your heart and your smile:



- Brush twice daily and floss regularly.
- Visit your dentist annually for cleanings and checkups.
- Use fluoride toothpaste and an antimicrobial mouthwash.

If you participate in Cook County's dental plan, visit Guardian Dental to learn more about how keep your teeth and gums in great shape.

Found this week's edition of Wellness Wednesdays to be helpful? Spread the word to your colleagues so they too can make heart health a priority in 2025.

SOURCES: *American Heart Association, American Family Physician, NIH.gov, Care Quest Institute for Oral Health*