

—⚡— Dr. FLM

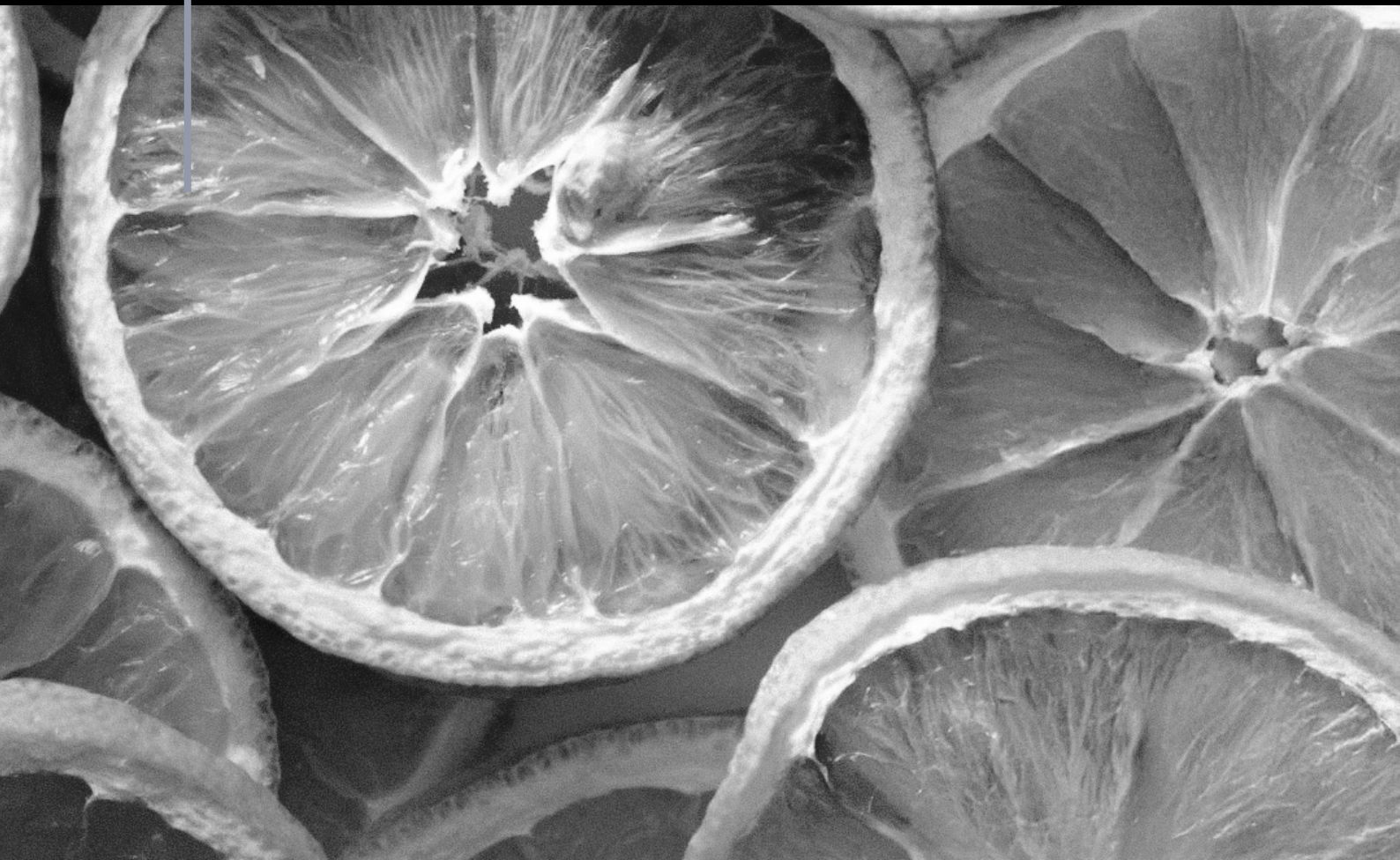
Dr. Francesco Lo Monaco

Food as Medicine

A Practical Guide to Heart-Healthy Eating

Dr Francesco Lo Monaco

The National Heart Clinic



Food as Medicine

A Practical Guide to Heart-Healthy Eating

Quick Summary

Consistency beats perfection. A sustainable pattern based on whole foods, healthy fats, and the Mediterranean approach is more powerful than restrictive fads. This guide explains practical heart-healthy eating principles, focusing on Mediterranean and DASH diets, an 'add, do not restrict' mindset, simple plate-building, and clear advice on alcohol and supplements.

Introduction

Food is powerful medicine for your heart. Unlike medications or procedures, dietary changes work slowly but profoundly over years. The best diet for cardiovascular health is one based on whole foods, mostly plants, healthy fats, and one you can sustain for life. This guide distills evidence-based nutritional strategies to help you improve heart health practically and sustainably.

Why Heart-Healthy Eating Is Challenging Today

Modern food environments promote unhealthy choices through engineered “bliss point” foods high in sugar, fat, and salt, aggressive marketing especially to children, economic barriers making processed foods cheaper, and time constraints limiting cooking. These factors make healthy eating difficult but not impossible. Small, consistent changes can yield powerful benefits.



Key Insight

Perfect adherence is impossible and unnecessary. Aim for consistency: eating well 80–90% of the time produces excellent cardiovascular results.

Core Principles of Heart-Healthy Eating

Focus on Adding, Not Just Restricting

Restrictive diets often fail because they are unsustainable. Instead, add more vegetables, whole grains, legumes, healthy fats (like extra virgin olive oil, nuts, avocados), and fish twice weekly. These additions naturally displace less healthy foods without feeling like deprivation.

Make It Sustainable

Choose flexible eating patterns you enjoy, that fit your lifestyle, and allow social meals and occasional treats. The best diet is the one you can maintain for life.

The Two Most Supported Dietary Patterns

Feature	Mediterranean Diet	DASH Diet
Primary Focus	Overall health & longevity	Blood pressure reduction
Fat Source	Extra virgin olive oil	Variety of vegetable oils
Dairy	Moderate, often full-fat	Low-fat or fat-free
Meat	Limited red meat, moderate poultry	Lean cuts only
Sodium	Naturally moderate	Explicitly restricted
Alcohol	Moderate wine traditional (optional)	Limited or none
Scientific Evidence	Strong observational + some RCTs	Strong RCTs for BP
Ease of Adoption	Flexible, culturally rooted	Structured servings

Both emphasize vegetables, fruits, whole grains, healthy fats, limited processed foods, and minimal red meat and sweets. Choose the one that fits your preferences and lifestyle.

Simple Plate-Building Framework

A practical way to build heart-healthy meals:

- Half your plate: a variety of colourful vegetables and some fruit
- One quarter: whole grains (brown rice, oats, whole wheat pasta)
- One quarter: lean protein (fish, poultry, legumes)
- Add healthy fats liberally (olive oil, nuts, avocado)
- Use herbs and spices instead of salt for flavour

This balanced approach supports cardiovascular health and is easy to follow.

Remember

Consistency over perfection. Build meals around plants and whole foods, add healthy fats, and choose lean proteins. Small, gradual changes add up.

Alcohol and Heart Health

Recent evidence suggests there may be no safe level of alcohol consumption for health. Previous beliefs about the benefits of moderate drinking are now thought to be influenced by confounding factors. Alcohol raises blood pressure, triggers dangerous arrhythmias (especially atrial fibrillation), weakens heart muscle, and increases stroke risk.

If you do not drink, do not start for health reasons. If you do drink, limit to 14 units per week (UK guidance), spread over at least 3 days, with several alcohol-free days, and avoid binge drinking.

Certain groups should abstain completely: those with atrial fibrillation, liver disease, history of addiction, heart failure, pregnancy, or on medications interacting with alcohol.

When to Avoid Alcohol Completely

1. History of addiction or liver disease
2. Atrial fibrillation or other arrhythmias
3. Heart failure or poorly controlled hypertension
4. Pregnancy or trying to conceive
5. Taking medications that interact with alcohol

Supplements: What You Need to Know

Supplements are not regulated like medicines and can vary widely in quality, potency, and safety. They can interact dangerously with medications and underlying conditions. Never start supplements without consulting your healthcare provider.

Some supplements have evidence for cardiovascular benefits in specific situations:

Supplement	Cardiovascular Implication	Important Notes
Omega-3 Fatty Acids (EPA/DHA)	Reduce cardiovascular events in high-risk patients; lower triglycerides	Prescription formulations preferred; increase bleeding risk; dose matters
Coenzyme Q10	May reduce statin muscle symptoms; support heart	Variable quality; not a statin substitute
Magnesium	Supports heart rhythm and blood pressure	Use if deficient; may cause diarrhoea; monitor kidney function
Berberine	Lowers LDL cholesterol and improves insulin sensitivity	Major drug interactions; use only under medical supervision
Vitamin D	Supports vascular health if deficient	Test before supplementing; avoid high doses
Folate (B9)	Lowers homocysteine; may reduce stroke risk	Check B12 before use; avoid masking deficiency
Curcumin	Anti-inflammatory effects	Poor absorption; quality varies; may interact with

Supplements with concerns or limited benefit include niacin, nattokinase, L-arginine, and red yeast rice (contains unregulated statin equivalent; safety and dosing issues).

Important

Supplements are adjuncts, not replacements for proven medications. Always discuss with your doctor before starting or stopping any treatment.

Practical Tips for Implementing Heart-Healthy Eating

- Start small and build gradually: add one vegetable daily, switch to whole grains, add fish twice weekly, then use olive oil as main fat.
- Make it convenient: batch cook, prep vegetables in advance, keep healthy snacks accessible.
- Involve your family: cook and eat together to create lasting habits.
- Allow flexibility: enjoy social occasions and treats without guilt.
- Work with a registered dietitian for personalised guidance and support.

Next Steps

- Discuss dietary changes with your GP or cardiologist.
- Request referral to a registered dietitian if available.
- Review medications that may be affected by diet changes.
- Set realistic, achievable goals and plan for ongoing support.
- Remember: small consistent changes lead to lasting heart health improvements.

When to Seek Help

Seek Medical Advice If You Experience

If you experience any of the following, call 999 immediately:

- New or worsening chest pain or breathlessness
- Symptoms of arrhythmia (palpitations, dizziness, fainting)
- Significant weight changes or muscle pain when starting supplements or medications
- Difficulty managing blood pressure or blood sugar with dietary changes
- Concerns about alcohol use or substance dependence
- Questions about medication interactions with diet or supplements

Summary

Heart-healthy eating is a lifelong commitment centred on whole, plant-based foods, healthy fats, and lean proteins. The Mediterranean and DASH diets provide flexible, evidence-based frameworks. Focus on adding nutritious foods rather than strict restriction.

Avoid or limit alcohol for cardiovascular safety. Use supplements cautiously and always under medical supervision. Small, consistent changes supported by your healthcare team can transform your heart health.

Your daily food choices play a significant role in your heart health.

Sources and Further Reading

This guide is adapted from **Heart Saviour** by Dr Francesco Lo Monaco and checked against British Heart Foundation guidance on the Mediterranean pattern and DASH diet, together with NHS low-risk drinking guidance.

Important Medical Disclaimer

This guide is for educational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. It is not a substitute for professional medical diagnosis or treatment. Always consult your healthcare provider before making changes to your medications, lifestyle, or treatment plans. If you experience severe symptoms such as chest pain or shortness of breath, seek emergency medical attention immediately (call 999 in the UK).



Dr. Francesco Lo Monaco

A Calm Place To Begin

If you would like to discuss a symptom, a family history or a preventive heart assessment, you are welcome to contact the clinic.

The National Heart Clinic
69 Harley Street
London W1G 8QW

Also consulting at
BMI Syon Clinic, Brentford
Clementine Churchill Hospital, Harrow



Visit the website to learn
more or make an enquiry.

Telephone: +44 7904 594 503
Website: drlomonacocardiologist.co.uk