

Keep the Beat

Top supplements for a healthier heart

Your heart is perhaps the hardest working organ in your body and it's the centerpiece of your cardiovascular system. And yet, one in every four American adults suffers from some type of cardiovascular disease.

Fortunately, there are many things you can do to avoid becoming one of these statistics. Adopting a whole foods diet filled with fruits, vegetables, healthy fats, and high-quality protein is a good place to start. Adding exercise—both cardio and resistance—can further strengthen your cardiovascular system. But there's another element that can help optimize your cardiovascular health: heart-healthy supplements. Here are seven scientifically supported herbs and nutrients that address many of the different facets of cardiovascular health.

Fight Free Radicals

Free radicals are molecules that are missing an electron (normal molecules have two electrons). To complete itself, a free radical will steal an electron from a neighboring molecule—which then steals an



electron from one of its neighbors—triggering a cascade of free radicals that can damage cells, including the cells that line your arteries. Not only can this contribute to the development of atherosclerosis, long-term free-radical damage can also lead to heart failure.

Antioxidants are nature's most effective weapon against this free radical damage. When it comes to your cardiovascular system, one of the best antioxidants is coenzyme Q10 (CoQ10).

CoQ10 provides energy to every cell in your body, including those in your heart. It protects the mitochondria against free-radical damage and helps to stabilize cells in the heart. In one clinical trial involving 51 patients with coronary artery disease, CoQ10 reduced free-radical oxidation by as much as 29 percent. Preliminary studies also suggest that CoQ10 exerts potent anti-inflammatory effects on the arteries.

CoQ10 is so important to heart health that low levels are linked to nearly every form of cardiovascular disease, including angina, hypertension, cardiomyopathy, and congestive heart failure. Yet as you age, your body's ability to make CoQ10 declines. Making matters worse, statin drugs deplete stores of this critical nutrient, making it an indispensable supplement for anyone taking these medications. But before your body can use supplemental CoQ10 (ubiquinone), it must first convert it to its more active form, ubiquinol. Fortunately, some CoQ10 supplements have already done the conversion for you. For enhanced bioavailability, look for a supplement that lists ubiquinol on the label.

Dial Down Inflammation

Inflammation is an important contributing factor for atherosclerosis. Plaque is naturally drawn to the site

of inflammation and, over time, it accumulates and narrows arteries. Chronic inflammation also weakens existing plaque, making it more vulnerable to bursting and causing a dangerous blockage.

Fish oil provides two specific **omega-3 fatty acids**: eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) that quell inflammation. Research shows that people with low DHA and EPA levels have higher C-reactive protein (CRP) levels—a marker indicating ongoing inflammation. But when these same people were given supplemental omega-3s, their CRP levels dropped significantly. Another study showed that women with high levels of EPA and DHA in their blood had 56 percent lower CRP levels. Reducing this inflammatory marker may slow plaque buildup in the arteries and help prevent the development and progression of atherosclerosis. But not all fish oil supplements are created equal. Avoid rancidity and low concentrations of DHA and EPA by looking for a high-quality bioidentical omega-3 supplement made from salmon bound to phospholipids for better absorption.

Help Prevent Calcification in Your Arteries

Coronary artery calcification is the buildup of calcium deposits within the walls of your arteries. Over time, this can reduce blood flow and increase your risk of heart attack and stroke. Men, especially those of European decent, are at a higher risk for coronary artery calcification, and the odds of calcium buildup increase with age. But your lifestyle also matters. Studies show that lifestyle-related health conditions like type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and obesity also boost your odds of calcification in your arteries.

While no supplement can magically erase arterial calcification, **vitamin K2** can help prevent calcium from being deposited in your arteries in the first place. In one long-term study of more than 4,800 people, those with the highest intake of vitamin K2 were 52 percent less likely to develop artery calcification and had a 57 percent lower risk of dying from heart disease. In addition to reducing calcium buildup, vitamin K2 also helps keep arteries strong and flexible. But make sure you're getting the K2 form of this fat-soluble nutrient since vitamin K1 won't confer the same heart-healthy benefits.



Maintain a Healthy Heart Rate

For healthy adults, a resting heart rate should fall between 60 and 90 beats per minute (BPM). Irregular heartbeat (arrhythmia) or a resting heart rate consistently higher than 90 BPM can be a sign of tachycardia, a condition where the heart beats faster than normal at rest. Left untreated, tachycardia can increase your risk of a sudden heart attack, stroke, or heart failure.

Studies show that boosting **magnesium** levels through supplementation can normalize your heartbeat and can even eradicate arrhythmia. It's so effective one study found that supplementation in patients undergoing cardiac surgery reduced their risk of arrhythmia by as much as 48 percent post-surgery. But be aware that many forms of this mineral can have a natural laxative effect. Luckily, you can get this nutrient's heart-rhythm benefits without the laxative effects with a chelated magnesium bisglycinate supplement. Readily absorbed by the body, magnesium bisglycinate also has calming properties and may improve sleep.

Enhance Blood Flow

The blood that flows through the arteries and blood vessels that make up your circulatory system provides every cell in your body with the oxygen and nutrients they need to function properly. But poor blood flow can rob your organs and tissues of these critical nutrients. Worse yet, sluggish circulation can also be a precursor to a heart attack or stroke.

French grape seed extract is rich in antioxidant compounds known as oligomeric proanthocyanidin complexes (OPCs) that can boost circulation by increasing

nitric oxide. Nitric oxide, which is naturally produced by the body, relaxes blood vessels and increases blood flow. A small eight-week study of healthy postmenopausal women found that supplemental grape seed extract also had blood-thinning effects, potentially reducing the risk

of blood clots and also increasing blood flow. As a bonus, a series of smaller clinical trials have reported that the OPCs in grape seed extract further reduce the risk of heart disease by lowering oxidative stress and inflammation. But to get these benefits, it's important to choose a tannin-free supplement that provides readily absorbed OPCs.

Promote Better Blood Pressure

High blood pressure—known clinically as hypertension—affects about 27 percent of all Americans. Often called the “silent killer” because it has no symptoms, high blood pressure occurs when the pressure inside your large arteries is too high—and it's a leading cause of heart attack and stroke. What's considered too high? Blood pressure that consistently reaches 130/80 or above.

Olive leaf extract is packed with polyphenols that help lower both systolic and diastolic blood pressure. One clinical study of 60 people with high blood pressure found that olive leaf extract effectively lowered blood

pressure compared to a placebo. Earlier research found that olive leaf extract was just as effective as the prescription drug captopril, a medication often prescribed to people with high blood pressure. Ensure you're getting both the blood-pressure and cholesterol-lowering benefits olive leaf extract has to offer with a supplement standardized to contain 16 to 24 percent oleuropein, the active compound in olive leaves.

Foster Healthier Cholesterol Levels

For years, cholesterol has been considered the primary boogeyman when it came to heart health. But here's the rub: You need cholesterol to build cell membranes, create hormones, help your metabolism run efficiently, and produce bile and vitamin D. Problems start when cholesterol becomes oxidized. Oxidized LDL (bad) cholesterol can trigger inflammation and the accumulation of cholesterol in artery walls. Over time, this can lead to plaque buildup that narrows and stiffens arteries.

Amla, also known as Indian gooseberry, is an ancient Ayurvedic herb that modern science credits with not only reducing total and LDL cholesterol levels, but also preventing oxidation. Studies also show that amla increases HDL (good) cholesterol levels. Additionally, amla may help reduce blood pressure and improve how well your arteries function thanks to the antioxidant-rich flavonols and anthocyanins in the berries. To get these benefits, look for an amla supplement that contains the fruit extract which is standardized to more than 35 percent polyphenols.

Giving your heart the nutrients it needs can help prevent many of the common complications that often leads to debilitating or even fatal consequences. Paired with a healthy lifestyle, these supplements may help ensure a cardiovascular system that can keep the beat for a lifetime. ■