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Embracing the Change: How Food Can Be Your Friend

Anyone living with heart disease knows that it's a real challenge to overcome the fear that everything you do can somehow make things worse. Suddenly, you're afraid to pull weeds in the garden, climb the steps to the front door, and to eat anything besides rice cakes. Fear of food is pervasive among women with heart disease, many of whom may already struggle with other health issues such as diabetes and high cholesterol, and it can be perplexing for women who always considered themselves to be relatively healthy before their diagnosis.

A new member of the WomenHeart online community recently appealed to others, writing "I'm afraid to eat since I had my heart attack." This woman, who is in her mid-forties, just had a heart attack in October 2008 and says that she is not a cook, which makes this problem even more difficult for her to solve.

Some women responded by suggesting that she consider following a Mediterranean diet rich in antioxidants, which focuses on eating more fresh fruits, vegetables, legumes, and fish. It turns out that these women were not only right, but right on the cutting edge. A 2009 study published by *Circulation* showed a 29% reduction in the risk of heart disease among women who ate a Mediterranean diet, and a huge 39% drop in their risk of dying from heart disease or stroke — comparable to using statins to lower cholesterol. A researcher who worked on the study, Teresa Fung, stated that the Mediterranean diet is "by far one of the easiest to follow because there are no extremes," emphasizing that the diet concentrates more on what types of food you eat, as opposed to portion control.

Dr. Penny Kris-Etherton, professor of nutrition at Penn State University, agrees, saying "A healthy diet is about eating a broad range of nutritious food." Rather than being fearful of food, she suggests that women with heart disease should take a proactive approach, pointing to helpful websites at the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Health and Human Services (*see links below*).

And while experts like Dr. Kris-Etherton provide important scientific knowledge for heart patients, there's nothing like getting support from someone who knows exactly what you're going through. Martha Garcia, a WomenHeart member who writes her own blog about heart-healthy cooking, took the bull by the horns when she discovered just a year ago — at the age of 26 — that she had peripartum cardiomyopathy. A self-described "foodie", Martha decided that she had to figure out how to make her new low-sodium diet more palatable and began researching alternatives for her favorite foods, such as chorizo (a Mexican sausage), pulled pork tacos, and spaghetti sauce. "I am currently working on recipes for low-salt pickles, because I love them," she says, "as well as italian sausage and low-sodium bread."

If you are struggling with heart-healthy eating, talk with your physician for advice on the best resources. You can also check out Martha's blog (<http://foodiesheart.blogspot.com/>) for inspiration and links to many other helpful sites. She has become so committed to this cause that she even invites her readers to send in their favorite recipes, which she will try to convert to more heart-friendly versions. It's just another example of why we refer to the members of WomenHeart as "sisters".

Nutrition and Diet Resources:

Study Shows Reduction in Stroke and Heart Risk With Mediterranean Diet

<http://www.webmd.com/heart-disease/news/20090216/mediterranean-diet-helps-womens-hearts>

The Mediterranean Diet

<http://www.webmd.com/diet/features/the-mediterranean-diet>

The Healthy Fridge

weblink: <http://www.healthyfridge.org/index.html>

Heart-Healthy Eating

weblink: <http://womenshealth.gov/faq/heart-healthy-eating.cfm>

Eating for a Healthy Heart

weblink: <http://www.fda.gov/opacom/lowlit/hlyheart.pdf>

Stocking a Heart-Healthy Kitchen

weblink: <http://www.webmd.com/cholesterol-management/high-cholesterol-tips-7/healthy-foods>