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The Portfolio Diet: The Solution to Heart Disease?

What if there was a combination of foods that were as effective at lowering LDL cholesterol as prescription drugs? Would it be worth adding some new foods to what you eat each day to avoid medication?

This is what the latest in a series of research studies Dr. Jenkins from the University of Toronto shows. Studies have previously shown that various foods, such as nuts, soy protein, oat bran, and plant sterols all can have a cholesterol-lowering effect. But what if you combined all these foods together? Dr. Jenkins' latest research shows that combining all these foods together is as effective as taking a statin drug. The results showed a 30.9% decrease in LDL cholesterol from the statin and a decrease of 28.2% from the portfolio combination of all these foods.

Dr. Jenkins is calling this a dietary portfolio, but it's becoming known as 'The Portfolio Diet'. The concept is to add all of these foods, in a type of portfolio plan, like investments, to cover all possibilities for better heart health. This is not a weight loss diet, however, although the concepts for weight loss and lowered cholesterol could certainly be combined, with proper education and guidance by a qualified nutrition expert.

What is the Portfolio Diet?

Just follow these guidelines:

1. Substitute soy foods for meat. Drink soy milk instead of milk and substitute soy protein foods for other meats.
2. Eat as much 'sticky' fiber as possible. People in the study took three daily servings of natural psyllium supplements. Oats and barley replace other grains and preferred vegetables include eggplant and okra.
3. Include plant sterol-enriched margarines, such as benecol and Take Control. Plant sterols are also available in capsule form as dietary supplements.
4. A handful of nuts every day. In the study, almonds were eaten and the Almond Board of California offers portfolio diet recipes on its website (look at recipes on <http://www.almondboard.com/>), but any tree nut will reduce cholesterol.

Here are some examples of a typical day:

Breakfast – Include soy milk, oat bran cereal with chopped fruit and almonds, oatmeal bread with sterol-enriched margarine, and some jam.

Lunch – Soy lunchmeats, oat bran bread, bean soup, fruit.

Dinner – Stir fry with vegetables, tofu, fruit and almonds.

Snacks – Include nuts, yogurt, and soy milk thickened with a psyllium supplement such as Metamucil.

Has this diet shown to be effective?

Jenkins et al were curious how this diet would work in the real world, so they signed people up who said they wanted to lower their cholesterol levels. They told them what to eat and gave them sample menus -- but they didn't provide any prepared foods.

Dr. Jenkins said that about 30% of the people had a 20% reduction in their LDL cholesterol levels after six months. Another 30% had a 15% reduction in LDL levels, and another third failed to lower their cholesterol levels, believed to be because they were unable to follow the diet as strictly as those with good results. What seemed to be the biggest obstacle for people was eating soy food products. Dr. Jenkins said that most people could eat almonds and substitute plant sterol products for margarine.

Is the diet for you?

Many people are concerned about heart disease and stroke, especially if they are struggling with weight control and high blood cholesterol levels. However, many people are not comfortable going on prescription medications. Since this is an eating plan that does not eliminate food groups or follow some type of fad, there is no risk to going on this 'diet'. In fact, it's not really a 'diet' at all, but a way of eating. And no one has to do anything but substitute some of the recommended foods for foods they normally eat today.

So, let's say you would like to try the diet, but, like many other Americans, are concerned about adding soy foods to your diet. You have never eaten them and don't even know where to find them! Well, they are actually in your favorite supermarket already! It may be time to experiment, though, because not everyone is going to like all the soy foods that are available. For more on soyfoods, check out the Soyfoods Association of American at <http://www.soyfoods.org/>. Here is a list of foods to consider:

Soy milk. There are multiple brands and different fat levels. You can buy whole fat, low fat and non fat. You can buy 'regular' (no flavoring), or any number of flavors. I have personally found one brand that I like over others and you may have to experiment to find one you like, as well.

Edemame. These are frozen whole soybeans that are harvested when still green. They can be found in most health food stores, such as Trader Joes or Whole Foods Market, in the frozen food section, usually next to the lima beans. These can be found shelled or in the shell. You can add them to soups or stews or eat them by themselves. I like to eat them as my protein for breakfast.

Tofu. Also known as 'bean curd', tofu is a soft, cheese-like food made by curdling soymilk. The curds are then pressed into a solid block. There are different levels of firmness; silken, soft and firm. Silken is a creamy, custard-like product that works well with pureed or blended dishes. Soft tofu is best used in recipes that call for blended tofu, or in soups. The firm tofu is more dense and solid and holds up well in stir fry dishes, even on the grill. The firm tofu is higher in protein, fat and calcium than the other forms, but since this is a plant fat, this should not be an issue. For recipe ideas, see this link from the Indiana Soybean Board; <http://www.soyfoods.com/soyfoodsdescriptions/tofu.html#anchor695596>.

Textured Vegetable (or Soy) Protein Products. This is the soyfood product that many soy burgers and other ‘meat substitute’ products contain. The best way to determine if these foods are for you are to experiment with a few options.

Miso. Miso is a rich, salty paste condiment that characterizes the essence of Japanese cooking. Traditionally, miso is made by combining with a grain, salt, and a mold culture and then aged in cedar vats for one to three years. Readers may recognize the name because this is a popular soup.

Soy nuts. Soy nuts are whole soybeans that have been soaked then baked. They can be found in snack isles and manufacturers now include soynuts in any number of coatings, including chocolate.

Tempeh. This is a traditional Indonesian food that is most commonly found in Asian stores. It is a chunky, tender soybean cake. It can be marinated and grilled or added to soups, casseroles, or even chili.

It can be very easy for some people to add nuts to their diet. In fact, it may be harder to not add too MANY nuts! It may also be ‘doable’ to add more sticky fiber to your diet, also, with a little planning. However, it may be a greater challenge to find soy foods that can be enjoyably substituted for meats you are used to eating. However, if your health depends on it, and you refuse medications, this may be a great thing to try, especially since there are no risks involved with adding these foods to your diet. Just remember that these are foods to be substituted, not added, to the diet. Since calories do also still count, adding extras to your current diet could result in weight gain, leading to new concerns.

Marjorie Geiser helps people overcome their confusion and distress they may feel when trying to add healthy eating and fitness into their busy lives. She offers a free, weekly teleclass phone series to subscribers of her Health Focus teleclass series, which covers all aspects of health each week. She is a Registered Dietitian, Personal Trainer and Life Coach. To learn more about her services, go to her website at www.megfit.com or email her at margie@megfit.com.