



'Best Diet' helps health, not just weight

by Christina Choi Jan 12, 2012

If you're looking to lower your blood pressure or seeking a new healthy eating plan, you might want to try the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet that was ranked the best diet of 2012, by U.S. News & World Report.

This is the second year in a row that U.S. News named the DASH diet as the "best diet overall." A panel of 22 medical experts on diet, obesity, nutrition, diabetes and heart disease developed the rankings list.

"It's not just the latest fad diet in terms of weight loss," said Marla Heller, the author of the best-selling "The DASH Diet Action Plan" and a certified nutritionist in Northbrook. "It's the only diet plan that's been proven to improve health."

The DASH diet emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fish, poultry, low-fat dairy products, nuts and legumes – foods that are low in saturated fat and cholesterol.

It recommends increasing intake of foods rich in nutrients that are beneficial to treat hypertension, mainly minerals (such as potassium, calcium and magnesium), protein and fiber and limiting sweets to a minimum.

One out of every three adult Americans has high blood pressure and half of them do not have it under control, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hypertension can increase the chance of heart disease and stroke and other related vascular diseases.

Developed by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, the DASH diet aims to deflate or prevent high blood pressure with a prescribed eating plan based on each person's calorie needs.

"The strength of the diet is that it's built on everyday food," Heller said. "It's a very flexible plan

based on the types of food you find at your grocery store.”

A heart-healthy diet is rich in vegetables, fruits, lean protein sources and whole grains, said **Christine Palumbo**, a registered dietitian in Naperville and a DASH diet admirer. It’s low in animal fat, trans fat and processed foods, she said.

A key factor in the DASH eating plan is lowering sodium intake. Recommended daily maximum is 2,300 mg, but for someone with hypertension, diabetes or chronic kidney disease, that limit is 1,500 mg.

The CDC reported the average daily sodium intake for Americans, ages 2 and older is 3,436 mg, much higher than the suggested daily amount for the DASH diet.

The DASH eating plan is also beneficial to those looking to prevent or control diabetes or to shed pounds, although it was not originally developed as a weight-loss diet. Because the diet doesn’t restrict entire food groups, it increases one’s chances of sticking with it long term.

Results showed women whose diets most closely resembled the DASH plan were 24 percent less likely to develop heart disease and 18 percent less likely to have a stroke, according to the Harvard University-based Nurses’ Health Study from 2008.

For those who like to see quick results, Heller claims that DASH diet users with hypertension would start seeing results in lower blood pressure and lower cholesterol in 14 days. In terms of weight loss, Heller said that pounds would shed at a more “moderate” level at one to two pounds a week.

Febe Santos, a resident from Homewood, said that she finds the DASH diet appealing. She said that implementing the eating plan for her family might help treat her husband’s problems with cholesterol and high blood pressure.

One of the drawbacks of the DASH diet is it requires a little more self-preparation for people who order take-out often or eat pre-made meals.

“Yes, it does mean getting back in the kitchen and getting off the couch,” **Palumbo** said. “Instead of watching cooking shows, star in your own cooking show and make your own meals.”

For more information on the Dash Diet, visit the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute’s site at <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/dash/>