

# Chapter I

## STRIP AWAY FAT, STRIP AWAY TROUBLE

Six Ways a Flat Stomach Will Dramatically Improve  
How You Look, Feel, and Live

**I**N GYMS, PLAYING FIELDS, BEACHES, AND bedrooms across the country, our bodies are constantly being measured. And in dressing room mirrors and on bathroom scales, we're constantly measuring ourselves. But let's set aside those vanity measurements and concentrate on measuring ourselves by a different set of criteria—the number of fat cells we're carrying.

The average American has about 30 billion fat cells; each of them is filled with greasy substances called lipids. When you pump doughnuts, corn chips, and fried Snickers

bars into your system, those fat cells can expand—up to 1,000 times their original size. But a fat cell can get only so big; once it reaches its physical limit, it starts to behave like a long-running sitcom. It creates spin-offs, leaving you with two or more fat cells for the price of one. Only problem: Fat cells have a no-return

---

## FAT'S DOMINOES

Overweight people are:

- ▶ 50 percent more likely to develop heart disease (obese: Up to 100 percent)
- ▶ Up to 360 percent more likely to develop diabetes (obese: Up to 1,020 percent)
- ▶ 16 percent more likely to die of a first heart attack (obese: 49 percent)
- ▶ Roughly 50 percent more likely to have total cholesterol above 250 (obese: Up to 122 percent)
- ▶ 14 percent less attractive to the opposite sex (obese: 43 percent)
- ▶ Likely to spend 37 percent more a year at the pharmacy (obese: 105 percent)
- ▶ Likely to stay 19 percent longer in the hospital (obese: 49 percent)
- ▶ 20 percent more likely to have asthma (obese: 50 percent)
- ▶ Up to 31 percent more likely to die of any cause (obese: 62 percent)
- ▶ 19 percent more likely to die in a car crash (obese: 37 percent)
- ▶ 120 percent more likely to develop stomach cancer (obese: 330 percent)
- ▶ Up to 90 percent more likely to develop gallstones (obese: Up to 150 percent)
- ▶ 590 percent more likely to develop esophageal cancer (obese: 1,520 percent)
- ▶ 35 percent more likely to develop kidney cancer (obese: 70 percent)
- ▶ 14 percent more likely to have osteoarthritis (obese: 34 percent)
- ▶ 70 percent more likely to develop high blood pressure (obese: Up to 170 percent)

policy. Once you have a fat cell, you're stuck with it. So as you grow fatter and double the number of fat cells in your body, you also double the difficulty you'll have losing the lipids inside them.

Many of us tend to store fat in our bellies, and that's where the health dangers of excess weight begin. Some of us store it above the belt, while others store it below the belt. In any case, abdominal fat doesn't just sit there and do nothing; it's active. It functions like a separate organ, releasing substances that can be harmful to your body. For instance, it releases free fatty acids that impair your ability to break down the hormone insulin (too much insulin in your system can lead to diabetes). Fat also secretes substances that increase your risk of heart attacks and strokes, as well as the stress hormone cortisol (high levels of cortisol are also associated with diabetes and obesity as well as with high blood pressure). Abdominal fat bears the blame for many health problems because it resides within striking distance of your heart, liver, and other organs—pressing on them, feeding them poisons, and messing with their daily function.

Now take a look at the people with flat stomachs and six-packs. They're the icons of strength and good health. They're lean; they're strong; they look good in clothes; they look good without clothes. A defined midsection, in many ways, has defined fitness. But it also defines something else: A flat stomach is the hallmark of people in control of their bodies and, as such, in control of their health.

While some people may think that working toward cutting-board-strong abs is shallower than a kiddie pool, there's nothing wrong with striving for a flat stomach or a six-pack. Of course, defined abs make you look good—and make others feel good about the way you look, too. (In one survey, both men and women rated abs as the sexiest body part.) And for good reason: When you're in great shape, you're telling the world that you're a disciplined, motivated, confident, and healthy person—and hence a desirable partner. And sometimes a little vanity can be good for your health:

In a recent Canadian study of more than 8,000 people, researchers found that over 13 years, the people with the weakest abdominal muscles had a death rate more than twice as high of those with the strongest midsections. Such research upholds the notion that flat stomachs do more than turn heads at the beach. In fact, your abdominal muscles control more of your body than you may even realize—and have just as much substance as show. In short, here are my top six reasons why flattening your belly is going to make your life better.

## Abs Will Help You Live Longer

**STUDY AFTER STUDY** shows that the people with the largest waist sizes have the most risk of life-threatening disease. The evidence couldn't be more convincing. According to the National Institutes

---

### ABS DIET SUCCESS STORY

## “I'M ON THE ABS DIET FOR LIFE”

**Name:** Marian Nagel

**Age:** 44

**Height:** 5'6"

**Starting weight:** 148

**Six weeks later:** 136

As a mother of teenagers, Marian Nagel came to a point when she had to make a decision. “Do I want to be old and fat or old and healthy?”

So Nagel decided to get back in shape for herself—as well as to inspire her son to do so, too. After purchasing *Men's Health* to help him, Nagel learned about the Abs Diet, and they both tried it. She told her son, “This isn't a diet; it's a list of foods you need to eat more of.” Within 6 weeks, Nagel's son dropped from 324 pounds to 292, and she dropped 12 pounds during the same time. (Since then, Nagel dropped down to 132, and she's now focused on losing just 4 more pounds.)

of Health, a waistline larger than 35 inches for women and larger than 40 inches for men signals significant risk of heart disease and diabetes. One study in the *International Journal of Obesity* found that women should strive for waist sizes less than 31.5, while men should strive for less than 35.4—as your waist grows larger, so does your risk of heart disease. Now the real scary part: The average American man’s waist size is a ponderous 38.8 inches, up from 37.5 in 1988, according to the journal *Obesity Research*. And another study showed that the average woman’s waist size is more than 36 inches. Both women and men with flabby midsections are at increased risk for the same health problems.

Of course, abs don’t guarantee you a get-out-of-the-hospital-free card, but studies show that by developing a strong abdominal section, you’ll reduce body fat and significantly cut the risk factors associated with many diseases, not just heart disease. For example,

---

“Especially for women over 40, it gets harder and harder to lose that belly fat after having kids,” says Nagel, who went from 27 percent body fat to about 20 during the initial part of the program and especially liked doing the interval training on a treadmill. “But I lost an incredible amount of inches. During the 6 weeks, I lost about 3½ inches off my waist. How nice it is to be curvy again. I see guys at the gym who can’t do the abs work that I do.”

Nagel also thinks the eating plan is perfect for women. “Women have a tendency to be nervous eaters more than men, and they assume they’re going to eat more and take more calories if they eat six meals a day. But if you do it the proper way, you’re nourishing your body, which speeds metabolism. You’re eating to be sure your body is burning something all the time,” Nagel says.

But for all the help the Abs Diet has given Nagel, she’s especially happy for the way it’s helped her son.

“The best thing for me is to set an example—not only to get myself in great shape, but be a good example for him,” Nagel says. “I absolutely love it, I’m still doing it; it’s more of a lifestyle change than a temporary thing. I’m on the Abs Diet for life.”

the incidence of cancer among obese patients is 33 percent higher than among lean ones, according to a Swedish study. The World Health Organization estimates that up to one-third of cancers of the colon, kidney, and digestive tract are caused by being overweight and inactive. A University of Minnesota study that tracked 22,000 women over 7 years found that overweight women who lost 20 or more pounds cut their risk of breast cancer by 19 percent. And having an excess of belly fat is especially dangerous. See, cancer is caused by mutations that occur in cells as they divide. Fat tissue in your abdomen spurs your body to produce hormones that prompt your cells to divide. More cell division means more opportunities for cell mutations, which means more cancer risk.

A lean waistline also heads off another of our most pressing health problems—diabetes. Currently, 13 million Americans have been diagnosed with adult-onset diabetes, and many more go undiagnosed. Fat, especially belly fat, bears the blame. There's a misconception that diabetes comes only from eating too much refined sugar, like the kind in chocolate and ice cream. But people contract diabetes after years of eating high-carbohydrate foods that are easily converted into sugar—foods like white bread, pasta, and mashed potatoes. Scarfing down a basket of bread and a bowl of pasta can do the same thing to your body that a carton of ice cream does: flood it with sugar calories. The calories you can't burn are what convert into fat cells that pad your gut and leave you with a disease that, if untreated, can lead to blindness, heart attacks, strokes, amputation, and death. And that, my friend, can really ruin your day. But you can control a lot of this; a study tracking 1,400 diabetic men and women for 9 years found that just *trying* to lose weight could cut diabetes-related death risk by up to 30 percent.

Upper-body obesity is also the most significant risk factor for obstructive sleep apnea, a condition in which the soft tissue in the back of your throat collapses during sleep, blocking your

airway. When that happens, your brain signals you to wake up and to start breathing again. As you nod off once more, the same thing happens, and it can continue hundreds of times during the night—making you chronically groggy and unable to get the rest your body needs. (You won't remember waking up over and over again; you'll just wonder why 8 hours of sleep left you dragging.) Fat's role is that it can impede muscles that inflate and ventilate the lungs, forcing you to work harder to get enough air. When Australian researchers studied 313 patients with severe obesity, they found that 62 percent of the people with a waist circumference of 49 inches or more had a serious sleep disturbance and that 28 percent of obese patients with smaller waists (less than 49 inches) had sleep problems.

Being overweight also puts you at risk for a lot of other conditions that rob you of a good night's rest, including gastroesophageal reflux and asthma. A 3-year French study of 67,229 women found that being overweight doubled the risk of asthma. And women who gained about 20 pounds from the time they started menstruating to the time they reached adulthood had 66 percent higher risk. All of this can create an ugly cycle: Abdominal fat leads to poor sleep. Poor sleep means you drag through your day. Sluggish and tired, your body craves some quick energy, so you snack on some high-calorie junk food. That extra junk food leads to more abdominal fat, which leads to . . . well, you get the picture.

I could fill this whole book with evidence, but I'm going to boil it down to one sentence: A smaller waist equals fewer health risks.

## **Abs Will Improve Your Sex Life**

**WOMEN CLAIM THE GREATEST** sex organ is the brain; men say it's approximately 3 feet due south. So let's say we split the geographic difference and focus on what's really central to a good sex life.

For both men and women, strong abdominal and lower-back muscles give you stamina and strength to try new positions (or stay steady in old ones), so that sex is as pleasurable as it should be. But even more important, a smaller waistline means that men and women will be better equipped in another important area—bloodflow.

Artery-clogging cheeseburgers don't discriminate, so when you're overweight, the gunk that gums up the blood vessels leading to your heart and brain also gums up the vessels that lead to your genitals. Plaque forms on the inside of your arteries, narrowing the passageways that blood must follow—meaning that blood has trouble making it to the pelvic area. Decreased flow of blood in the pelvic area in women can lead to decreased lubrication, sensitivity, and sexual pleasure.

At least one study of more than 200 women showed that by increasing bloodflow to the genital area of women, you could increase lubrication, sensitivity, arousal, and sensation to the area. Though the results are preliminary, it does suggest that clear faucets in both genders can play a role in sexual satisfaction.

## **Abs Will Keep You Safe from Harm**

**IN SCHOOL**, YOU were taught the story of Mrs. O'Leary's cow and how, with one awkward misstep, the lumbering bovine knocked over an oil lamp that started the Great Chicago Fire and burned much of that toddlin' town to the ground. That tragedy happened at a time when most urban housing was still built with wood. Today, such a disaster is unthinkable—and not just because we don't let cows into the living room anymore. It's unthinkable because the infrastructure of today's cities is built with steel—steel that stands up to fire, to earthquakes, and to hurricanes.

Think of your midsection as your body's infrastructure. You don't want a core made of dry, brittle wood or straw. You want one made of solid steel, one that will give you a layer of protection that belly fat never could.

Consider a US Army study that linked powerful abdominal muscles to injury prevention. After giving 120 artillery soldiers the standard army fitness test of situps, pushups, and a 2-mile run, researchers tracked their lower-body injuries (such

---

## BABY, BABY, WHERE DID OUR LUNCH GO?

Your last meal didn't wind up just in your stomach. After a meal, your body begins to apportion the calories to nutrient-hungry organs, growing muscles, and, yes, your belly. Michael Jenson, MD, professor of medicine in the division of endocrinology, diabetes, and metabolism at the Mayo Clinic, calculated this breakdown of how your body processes food.

**10 percent to the kidneys.** Kidneys work to make sure the blood is balanced with the right amounts of water and nutrients.

**5–10 percent to the heart.** The heart gets most of its energy from fat, which provides more long-term energy for the hardworking heart than glucose can.

**23 percent to the liver, pancreas, spleen, and adrenal glands.** After the liver pulls out nutrients, it stores excess calories as glycogen.

**25 percent to muscles.** Muscles require a constant source of energy just to maintain their mass, so the more muscle you have, the more calories you burn.

**10 percent to the brain.** Glucose is brain fuel. It can't be stored long term, which is why people often feel faint if they skip a meal.

**10 percent to thermogenesis.** The simple act of breaking down the food you just ate takes up one-tenth of your calories.

**2–3 percent to fat cells.** Your fat cells grow and eventually divide as more and more calories are deposited.

**10 percent to no one knows where.** Your body's a big place, and some calories go unaccounted for.

as lower-back pain and Achilles tendonitis) during a year of field training. The 29 soldiers who cranked out the most situps (73 in 2 minutes) were five times less likely to suffer lower-body injuries than the 31 who barely notched 50. But that's not the most striking element. Those who performed well in the pushups and 2-mile run enjoyed no such protection—suggesting that upper-body strength and cardiovascular endurance had little effect on keeping bodies sound. It was abdominal strength that offered the protection. Unlike any other muscles in your body, a strong core affects the functioning of the entire body. Whether you ski, do yard work, or carry the kids away from the candy aisle, your abs are the most essential muscles for keeping you from injury. The stronger they are, the stronger—and safer—you are.

---

## ABS DIET SUCCESS STORY

### “I WENT FROM BRANDO TO RAMBO!”

**Name:** Bill Stanton

**Age:** 40

**Height:** 5'8"

**Starting weight:** 220

**Six weeks later:** 190

Bill Stanton, a security consultant, had been pumping iron since he was 15. But even with Stanton's rigorous weight training, he kept getting fatter: By the time Stanton reached 40, he had ballooned to 220 pounds on his 5-foot-8 frame. Why? Because Stanton's diet and exercise routine consisted of doing bench presses and squats and then finishing the night with chicken wings and booze.

“My pants were fitting me like a tourniquet, and it was like I was in a bad marriage; I was living comfortably uncomfortable,” Stanton says. “The Abs Diet challenged me to get on the program, step up to the plate, and step away from the plate.”

## Abs Will Strengthen Your Back

I HAD A FRIEND who threw out his back maybe two or three times a year. He always did it in the simplest way—sleeping a little awkwardly or getting out of a chair too quickly. One time, he pulled it out reaching into the back seat of his car to get something his young daughter had dropped. The pain once stabbed him so badly that he collapsed to the ground while he was standing at a urinal. (Go ahead. Imagine that.) His problem wasn't that he had a bad back; it was that he had weak abs. If he had trained them regularly, he could've kept himself from being one of the millions of people who suffer from back pain every year. (And yes, he started the Abs Diet Workout a year ago, and within weeks his back pain virtually disappeared.)

Since most back pain is related to weak muscles in your trunk,

---

After following the Abs Diet for 6 weeks, Stanton lost 30 pounds—and has cut his body fat from 30 percent to 15 percent. "I looked pregnant. I looked like a power lifter—big arms, a big chest, and a big gut. Now I look like Rambo."

Stanton appreciated the diversity of the Abs Diet meals and the plan's total-body approach to working out, though he admits that eating six times a day took some getting used to. "What I had to do was learn to eat to live, not live to eat," he says. And then, he says, everything just rolled from there. Once Stanton's mental approach changed—being committed to the plan, limiting the number of times he partied at night, and eliminating late-night meals—he was able to turn everything around. "You wake up attacking the day rather than waiting for the day to end," he says.

Now, everything just feels better. Stanton's always in a good mood. He walks taller. He has more energy. And now he's a model for others.

"I work out at Sports Club LA, where people are *really* focused on looking great," he says. "Even there, guys and girls all come up to me. One guy said, 'You are kicking butt. Everybody sees that transformation. You're inspiring a lot of people.'"

Stanton has changed his physique so dramatically that he's even been accused of taking steroids. "I take that as a compliment," he laughs.

maintaining a strong midsection can help resolve many back issues. The muscles that crisscross your midsection don't function in isolation; they weave through your torso like a spider web, even attaching to your spine. When your abdominal muscles are weak, the muscles in your butt (your glutes) and along the backs of your legs (your hamstrings) have to compensate for the work your abs should be doing. The effect, besides promoting bad company morale for the muscles picking up the slack, is that it destabilizes the spine and eventually leads to back pain and strain—or even more serious back problems.

## **Abs Will Limit Your Aches and Pains**

**AS YOU AGE**, it's common to experience some joint pain—most likely in your knees and hips, but maybe around your feet and ankles, too. The source of that pain might not be weak joints; it might be weak abs—especially if you do any kind of exercise, from the serious tennis player to the every-morning walker. When you're doing any type of athletic activity, your abdominal muscles help stabilize your body during start-and-stop movements, like changing direction on the tennis court or in kickboxing class. If you have weak abdominal muscles, your joints absorb all the force from those movements. It's kind of like trampoline physics. Jump in the center, and the mat will absorb your weight and bounce you back in the air. Jump toward the side of the trampoline, where the mat meets the frame, and you'll bust the springs. Your body is sort of like a trampoline, with your abs as the center of the mat and your joints as the supports that hold the mat to the frame. If your abs are strong enough to absorb some shock, you'll function well. If they're not, the force puts far more pressure on your joints than they were built to withstand.

Similar protection benefits extend to people who aren't athletes, too. One Dutch study of nearly 6,000 people found that those

with larger waist sizes were more likely to have heel pain and develop carpal tunnel syndrome, a painful hand and wrist condition. One study even found that 70 percent of people with carpal tunnel syndrome were either overweight or obese.

## **Abs Will Help You Win**

**IF YOU RUN,** bike, play naked Twister, or do any sport that requires movement, your essential muscle group isn't your legs or arms. It's your core—the muscles in your torso and hips. Developing core strength gives you power to perform. It fortifies the muscles around your whole midsection and trains them to provide the right amount of support when you need it. So if you're weak off the serve, strong abs will improve it. If you also play sports where you run a lot, whether it's tennis or tag, abs can improve your game tremendously. That's because speed is really about accelerating and decelerating. How fast can you go from a stopped position at one baseline to stopping at the other baseline? Your legs don't control that; your abs do. When researchers studied what muscles were the first to engage in these types of sports movements, they found that the abs fired first. The stronger they are, the faster you'll get to the ball.

• • •

These are all great reasons to pursue the Abs Diet. But the best reason is this: The program is an easy, sacrifice-free plan that will let you eat the foods you want and keep you looking and feeling better day after day. It's designed to help you lose weight in the easiest possible ways: by recalibrating your body's internal fat-burning furnace, by focusing on the foods that trigger your body to start shedding flab, and by rebuilding you into a lean, mean, fat-burning machine.

## ABS DIET HEALTH BULLETIN

**WHAT THE HECK IS . . . HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?**

You know high blood pressure is bad, but you probably have a little trouble getting your head around the whole concept of how “blood pressure” works. “Can’t we just let a little of the blood out and lower the pressure?” you might wonder. If only it were so easy.

When most people think of blood pressure, they think in terms of a garden hose: Too much pressure and the hose bursts, unless you open the valve. But that model is too simple. It helps instead to think of your circulatory system as more like the Erie Canal—a series of locks and gates that help move blood around to where it’s needed. See, gravity works on your blood just like it works on the rest of your body: It wants to pull everything downward. So imagine yourself hopping out of bed tomorrow morning and standing up. Gravity wants to take all that blood that’s distributed throughout your body and pull it down into your feet. You, on the other hand, would like that blood to pump to your brain, where it can help you figure out where the hell your keys are.

On cue, arteries in the lower body constrict while the heart dramatically increases output. The instant result: Blood pressure rises, and blood flows to the brain. Ahh, there they are—in the dog’s water dish, right where you left them.

It’s an ingenious system, but one that’s incredibly easy to throw out of whack. When you pack on extra padding around your stomach, your heart pumps harder to force blood into all that new fatty tissue. When you nosh on potato chips and other high-sodium foods, your body retains water in order to dilute the excess sodium, increasing overall blood volume. When you line your arteries with plaque from too many fatty meals, pressure increases as the same amount of blood has to squeeze through newly narrowed vessels. When you let the pressures of the day haunt you into the night, your brain pumps out stress hormones that keep your body in a perpetual state of fight-or-flight anxiousness, also forcing your heart to pump harder. High-salt, high-fat diets and an excess of stress all combine to create a dangerous situation.

Much to the dismay of Quentin Tarantino fans, letting out some blood won’t relieve the pressure. Your heart is still pumping, and your blood vessels are still dilating and contracting to make sure the blood goes where it’s needed. When the pressure remains high for years on end, thin-walled vessels in the brain can burst under extreme pressure; brain cells die as a result in what’s known as a hemorrhagic stroke. Or hypertension can cause plaque buildup in

one of the brain's arteries, eventually cutting off bloodflow. (High blood pressure damages smooth artery walls, creating anchor points for plaque to latch onto.) Kidney failure or a heart attack can also follow from dangerous plaque accumulations.

Then there's the plain old wear and tear that high blood pressure causes on your ticker. Over time, the extra work brought on by high blood pressure causes the walls of the heart to stiffen and thicken. The heart becomes a less efficient pump, unable to push out as much blood as it takes in. Blood backs up, the heart gives out, and the coroner scribbles "congestive heart failure" on your chart.

Ideally, your blood pressure should be 120/80 or lower. What do those numbers mean? The top number, called the *systolic* pressure, is the pressure generated when the heart beats. The bottom number is the *diastolic* pressure, the pressure on your blood vessels when the heart is resting between beats. Higher readings are broken out into three categories:

- ▶ **Prehypertensive: 120–139 systolic/80–89 diastolic.** Prehypertensives should start worrying now about their blood pressure, concentrating on diet and exercise tips like those found in the Abs Diet. You may not see the flashing lights in your mirror right now, but your radar detector just went off. Time to slow down.
- ▶ **Stage I hypertensive: 140–159 systolic/90–99 diastolic.** For people who fall in this range, drug therapy is usually recommended in addition to lifestyle changes. Your risk of heart attack or stroke is elevated, and you need to be under a doctor's care.
- ▶ **Stage II hypertensive: 160 or greater systolic/100 or greater diastolic.** Advanced drug therapy is often a must for people at this level, who face a serious risk of being maimed or killed by their condition.

So, two questions: Do you know what your blood pressure is? If not, are you freaked out enough by now to start taking care of it? Fortunately, the Abs Diet Powerfoods can help by cutting down on the bad fats in your diet and increasing the good ones—and by slashing away some of those extra pounds. So can the Abs Diet Workout, as well as a few stress-reduction techniques. (To find out how you can help manage your stress level, see "How Stress Makes You Fat" on page 160.) In the meantime, try attacking the problem with some of these simple tips.

**Make it a low-sodium V8.** Make that two 5.5-ounce cans: 11 ounces of V8 contains nearly 1,240 milligrams (mg) of potassium. In a study published in the

(continued)

## ABS DIET HEALTH BULLETIN

**WHAT THE HECK IS ... HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?  
(CONT.)**

*Journal of Human Hypertension*, researchers found that prehypertensive patients who added more potassium to their diets lowered their systolic pressure by 2.5 points and their diastolic by 1.6 points. Potassium helps sweep excess sodium from the circulatory system, causing the blood vessels to dilate. What makes V8 better than a banana (another good source of potassium)? V8 also contains lycopene and lutein, two phytochemicals that have their own blood pressure-lowering properties.

**Cut out the cold cuts.** One slice of ham contains 240 milligrams of sodium, more salt than you'll find on the outside of two pretzel rods. The point: Lose the lunchmeat, and lower your blood pressure. A recent study found that prehypertensive people who reduced their daily sodium consumption from 3,300 to 1,500 milligrams knocked nearly 6 points off their systolic blood pressure and close to 3 off their diastolic. If you want to have your hoagie and eat it, too, at least switch to the Boars Head line of low-sodium meats—ham, turkey, roast beef—and leave the pickle on your plate (833 milligrams of sodium). Another rule of thumb: If a food comes canned or jarred, it's probably a salt mine.

**Go two rounds and out.** Make the second drink of the night your last call for alcohol. In a landmark study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, researchers found that one or two drinks a day actually decreased blood pressure slightly. Three drinks or more a day, however, elevated blood pressure by an average of 10 points systolic and 4 diastolic. The type of alcohol doesn't matter. Heck, order a screwdriver: Orange juice is one of the best sources of blood pressure-lowering potassium.

**Drink more tea.** An American Heart Association study found that people who drank two cups of tea a day were 25 percent less likely to die of heart disease than those who rarely touched the stuff. The reason: Flavonoids in the tea not only improve blood vessels' ability to relax but also thin the blood, reducing clotting.

**Top your toast.** Black currant jelly is a good source of quercetin, an antioxidant that Finnish researchers believe may improve heart health by preventing the buildup of the free radicals that can damage arterial walls and allow plaque to penetrate.

**Have a Mac(intosh) attack.** People who frequently eat apples have a 20 percent lower risk of developing heart disease than those who eat apples less often.

**Eat fresh berries.** Raspberries, strawberries, and blueberries are all loaded with salicylic acid—the same heart disease fighter found in aspirin.

**Order the tuna.** Omega-3 fats in tuna and other fish as well as flaxseed help strengthen heart muscle, lower blood pressure, prevent clotting, and reduce levels of potentially deadly inflammation in the body.

**Squeeze a grapefruit.** One grapefruit a day can reduce arterial narrowing by 46 percent, lower your bad cholesterol level by more than 10 percent, and help drop your blood pressure by more than 5 points.

**Feast on potassium.** Slice a banana (487 milligrams) on your cereal, then bake two small sweet potatoes (612 mg) or cook up some spinach (1 cup has 839 mg) for dinner. All are loaded with potassium. Studies show that not getting at least 2,000 milligrams of potassium daily can set you up for high blood pressure. Other good sources of potassium include raisins (1 cup, 1,086 mg), tomatoes (1 cup sauce, 811 mg), lima beans (1 cup, 955 mg), and papayas (one has 781 mg of the mineral).

**Buy calcium-fortified OJ.** Increasing the calcium in your diet can lower your blood pressure. You'll derive a benefit from the vitamin C as well. According to research from England, people with the most vitamin C in their bloodstreams are 40 percent less likely to die of heart disease.

**Snack on pumpkin seeds.** One ounce of seeds contains 151 milligrams of magnesium, more than a third of your recommended daily intake. Magnesium deficiencies have been linked to most risk factors for heart disease, including high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol levels, and increased buildup of plaque in the arteries. Other great sources: halibut (170 mg in 7 ounces of fish), brown rice (1 cup, 84 mg), chickpeas (1 cup, 79 mg), cashews (1 ounce, 74 mg), and artichokes (one gives you 72 mg).

**Change your oil.** Researchers in India found that people who replaced the corn and vegetable oils in their kitchens with monounsaturated fats (olive oil or, in this case, sesame seed oil) lowered their blood pressure by more than 30 points in just 60 days without making any other changes in their diets.

**Cut down on mindless candy snacking.** A compound in licorice root has been shown to spike blood pressure—especially in people who eat a lot of black licorice. Fruit-flavored licorice, however, doesn't contain the compound.