

## Before the Challenge: February 7-13

### Make a plan! What meals and snacks will help you do this?

My intention is that you just focus on just the one action recommended for each day, so you can really give it some thought.

However, if you're already practicing many of these habits, you may choose to consider the challenge cumulative. Each day add the new action *and* keep doing the previous ones.

If you're super-keen, you might want to see how many days you can hit all ten actions.

But if you get overwhelmed, **just focus on practicing the one habit for each day.**

### Meal Planning: Keep it Simple

Plan for as many days, and in as much detail as you like.

Some people find it works best to pick up food once a week, or even for the whole ten days, while others go to the store every 2-3 days. Whatever works best for you is perfect.

### Sweet Spot Favourites

These are some of my best-loved blood pressure friendly recipes. I picked them to give you creative and delicious ideas. You don't have to use them of course, but hopefully you find a few you enjoy too.

**Before the Challenge: February 7-13**  
**Hit the grocery store. Shopping list:**

**Non-Food**

**Meat / Fish**

**Baking**

**Dairy**

**Canned Goods**

**Frozen**

**Other Dry Goods**

**Bakery**

**Bulk**

**Produce**

**Natural**

**Deli**

## Day 1: Thursday, February 14

### Have 4-5 servings of fruit today.

Fruit is our first component of the DASH eating pattern, which has been shown to lower blood pressure in as little as two weeks. (DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension.) More on that later.

#### What is a serving?

A serving of fruit is a ½ cup or a medium-sized piece of fruit, like an apple or orange. If you eat a larger piece of fruit, like a big apple, you can count it as 1-½ or 2 servings, but don't get too hung up on precisely counting servings. The point is to eat plenty of fruit!

#### 4-5 servings of fruit sounds like a lot!

This amount is for someone eating ~2000 calories a day. If you have a smaller appetite, 3 servings are fine. But if you eat a good deal of food, aim for 4-5 servings. If you don't like fruit that much, one option is to replace some or all of the fruit with extra vegetables.

#### Does juice count?

The original DASH studies included fruit juice, with ¾-cup being a serving. However, given that even 100% unsweetened fruit juice is a concentrated form of sugar, even though it's "natural" sugar, it's best to stick with whole fruit most of the time.

#### What if I have diabetes or pre-diabetes?

Fruit is absolutely supported by the [Diabetes Canada guidelines](#). They even note that, in people with diabetes, a higher intake of fruit (>3 servings/day) is associated with a decreased risk of cardiovascular and all-cause mortality.

If you're concerned about blood sugars, you can spread your fruit intake throughout the day, as with all carbohydrate-containing foods. You can also check your blood sugar two hours after eating fruit.

#### Ideas!

- Fruit goes well with breakfast, as a snack, or to replace dessert after a meal. But getting 4-5 servings a day takes some focus.
- Frozen fruit is as nutritious as fresh, and often less expensive and more convenient.
  - Try frozen raspberries warmed in the microwave over oatmeal.
  - Try nibbling on frozen grapes or blueberries for a sweet treat.
  - Try letting frozen cherries or mango defrost overnight in plain yogurt you've packed for an on-the-go snack.
- Apples last about a month in the fridge, they're grown close to home, and relatively inexpensive, so there's no reason not to have some on hand at all times.
- Mandarin oranges are easy to peel, portable, and available nearly year-round.
- Bananas get a bad rap because they're a bit higher in sugar and calories, but they're a good source of blood pressure-friendly potassium, they're inexpensive and convenient, and great for baking.
- If you're making dessert anyhow, incorporate fruit, as in a fruit crisp or tart.

## Sweet Spot Favourite: Berry Tart

*Adapted from The Student's Vegetarian Cookbook*

2/3 cup whole wheat flour

1/3 cup sugar

1-1/2 teaspoons baking powder

1/4 teaspoon salt

2/3 cup milk of your choice

1/2 teaspoon vanilla

1-1/2 tablespoons non-hydrogenated margarine or butter

2 cups fresh or frozen berries

1. Pre-heat the oven to 350F.
2. In a medium bowl, combine flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt.
3. Add the milk and vanilla. Stir until the batter is smooth.
4. Melt margarine/butter in the microwave, in the bottom of an 8x8" baking dish.
5. Pour in the batter and sprinkle the top with berries. Bake for 35-40 minutes or until the tart is golden brown and cooked through in the middle.

*Note: If you use frozen berries, thaw them first.*

## Day 2, Friday, February 15

### Have 4-5+ servings of vegetables today.

This is another key component of the DASH eating pattern.

#### What is a serving?

Again, a serving of vegetable is a ½ cup, and this is for ~2000 calories a day. If you eat a leafy green vegetable, like lettuce or spinach, count each whole cup as a serving.

#### Okay that's a lot of vegetables!

Again, this is for ~2000 calories a day. Adjust to match your appetite.

Together with the fruit, it still might sound like a lot, but really each serving is generally ½ cup, so we're talking about two cups of vegetables over the course of the day, or about a cup with lunch and a cup with supper. That's doable, right?

#### Do potatoes count?

Yes! They're a good source of blood-pressure friendly potassium, as well as fibre and vitamin C, so the DASH program calls them a vegetable. But they're more carbohydrate and calorie dense, like grains, so if you're having potatoes or another starchy vegetable, you might want to have just 1/2 to 1 cup, and have a smaller portion of grains at that meal.

In general, aim to keep the grains and starches component of each meal, including potatoes, to about a cup or a quarter of the plate.

#### Ideas!

- Roast vegetables to bring out the natural sweetness.
  - Toss in oil
  - Spread out on a baking sheet so they're not crowded
  - Roast at 375-400F.
  - Stir every 10-15 minutes. Most vegetables will be done in about 20 minutes.
- Add them to mixed dishes like lasagna, eggs, soup, sandwiches, pasta, and burritos.
- Boost the flavour:
  - Dip carrots or other raw vegetables in hummus
  - Drizzle a simple homemade vinaigrette on salad or cooked vegetables
  - Cook them with garlic, ginger, or onions
  - Toss with chopped nuts or seeds
  - Add fresh or dried herbs and spices
  - Sprinkle with small amounts of flavourful cheese.

#### Time-savers

- Pre-washed spinach and other leafy greens
- Frozen veggies – just as nutritious plus usually more convenient and affordable.

## Sweet Spot Favourite: Roasted Chick Peas with Garlic and Chard

Source: Julie van Rosendaal (*dinnerwithjulie.com*)

### CHICKPEAS

1 19 oz. (540 mL) can chickpeas (also known as garbanzo beans), rinsed and drained  
1 head of garlic, separated into cloves and peeled  
2 shallots or 3 green onions, roughly chopped  
2 bay leaves  
1/3 cup olive or canola oil

### CHARD

2 Tbsp. olive or canola oil  
1 large bunch Swiss chard, center stems removed and leaves coarsely torn  
6 garlic cloves, crushed  
1/2 cup vegetable, chicken or beef broth

1. Preheat oven to 400°F.
2. In a baking dish or cast iron skillet, combine the chickpeas, garlic, shallots or green onions, bay leaves and oil. Roast for about 45 minutes, shaking the pan once or twice, until everything is golden.
3. If you used a cast iron skillet, pour the chickpea mixture into a bowl and set the skillet on the stove top. (Otherwise, pull out a skillet.)
4. Drizzle with oil and when it's hot but not smoking, saute the chard and garlic for about 5 minutes, until it's wilted. Pour the stock overtop, cover and cook for another 10 minutes, until the chard is tender. Remove the lid and drain any excess liquid away.
5. Add the chickpea mixture to the pan, season the whole thing with salt and pepper, toss around (add a little extra oil if you need to) until heated through, and serve.

## Day 3, Saturday, February 16

### Make all your grains whole today

Whole grains are also part of the DASH program. They're higher in potassium, magnesium, and fibre than refined (white) grains, which makes a difference to your blood pressure.

Some whole grains that are commonplace and easy to use:

- Brown and wild rice
- Substitutes for rice: Cracked wheat / bulgur, quinoa, barley, wheat berries
- Hot cereal (eg. oats, Red River)
- Popcorn!
- Whole-wheat pasta
- Whole-grain crackers (eg. Triscuit, Ryvita).
- Whole-grain bread (eg. the whole grains from Dempsters, Cobs Bakery)
- Whole-grain bread products: tortillas, English muffins, buns, bagels...

#### How much should I have?

There is some flexibility on this, so let your appetite be the guide. The original DASH studies used 6-8 servings for the 2000-calorie level, but subsequent blood pressure studies (OmniHeart) had good success with just 4-5 servings, swapping the grain servings for extra plant-based protein or healthy fats.

Again, a serving is ½-cup, or a small slice of bread (30g). To keep it simple, aim for about a quarter of your plate being grains or other starches at each meal.

**The important thing today is to try ensuring that all of your grains are whole grains.**

#### How do I know if my bread/crackers/cereal is a whole grain?

I often find when working individually with clients that people aren't eating as many whole grains as they think they are. To be sure, check the list of ingredients. Make sure the **first ingredient** on the list is some kind of whole grain.

For examples and to test your know-how, see my [Whole Grain Pop Quiz](#).

## Sweet Spot Favourite: Wheat Berry and Corn Salad

*Adapted from a Bonnie Stern recipe*

*Note: Wheat berries take a while to cook, but they're worth it! You can freeze extras.*

### SALAD

2 cups wheat berries  
3 cups frozen corn  
2 whole roasted red peppers or 2 sweet red peppers, diced  
1/2 pound asparagus, trimmed (optional)

1/2 cup fresh cilantro  
1/4 cup chopped fresh chives

### DRESSING

1/2 cup rice vinegar  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
2 tbsp orange juice concentrate  
1 tbsp minced jalapeno (optional)  
1/4 teaspoon salt  
1/2 teaspoon pepper  
3 tablespoons olive oil

1. Rinse wheat berries and place in a large saucepan covered with at least 4" (10cm) cold water. (Alternately, use a pressure cooker.)
2. Bring to a boil and simmer gently for 1 to 1-1/2 hours or until tender. They should still be chewy but tender. (25-30 minutes in the pressure cooker.)
3. Rinse with cold water. Drain well and place in a large bowl.
4. Add corn and peppers to wheat berries.
5. Grill or roast (optional) asparagus until barely cooked. Add to wheat berries.
6. In a small bowl, combine dressing ingredients. Toss with wheat berries. Add herbs.
7. Taste and adjust seasoning if necessary.

*Note: As with many recipes, you can improvise this to your heart's content. Swap the wheat berries for quinoa or bulgur, or use different vegetables if that's what you have on hand.*



## Day 4, Sunday, February 17

### Enjoy nuts and/or seeds today

Nuts and seeds are also part of (you guessed it) the DASH eating pattern, as a source of magnesium, potassium, and fibre, not to mention protein and healthy fats.

If you already eat nuts and seeds regularly, perhaps this can be an opportunity to experiment with something new. See ideas below.

#### Aren't nuts high in fat and calories?

Yep, but it's mostly heart-healthy fat, and it turns out that reducing that doesn't improve heart health or weight control. On the contrary, nuts and seeds are associated with better cardiovascular outcomes and they're satisfying to boot.

#### How much should I have?

We're looking for about a 1/3 cup of nuts or two tablespoons of nut butter or seeds.

In the original DASH studies, people had either this *or* legumes 4-5 times a week, but the subsequent OmniHeart study had success with even more, so again, let your appetite guide you.

#### Ideas!

- Bring nuts or homemade trail mix for an afternoon snack. With a piece of fruit or some raw veggies, this can help you get through to supper.
- Enjoy a peanut butter and banana sandwich (on whole grain bread of course). Heart healthy comfort food!
- For a nut-free twist, sunflower seed butter is quite good, and similarly nutritious.
- Try chia seeds, which are also a great source of soluble fibre (cholesterol lowering) and heart-healthy omega-3 fat. They're great in chia jam and chia pudding (google it). Or you can add to a smoothie or energy ball/bar.
- Other heart-healthy seeds include flax (go with ground for the most nutrition), hemp hearts, and inexpensive sunflower and pumpkin seeds. Bonus: Seeds can go to school.

## Sweet Spot Favourite: Peanut Butter Pasta

*Adapted from the 15-Minute Vegetarian Gourmet*

### PASTA

- 12 ounces linguine
- 4 cups broccoli florets
- 4 cups cherry tomatoes
- 1 package firm tofu (optional, shrimp is also good)

### SAUCE

- 2/3 cup peanut butter
- 1 cup reduced-sodium vegetable or chicken stock
- 2 teaspoons reduced-sodium soy sauce
- 1/4 cup white rice vinegar
- 2 tablespoons canola or peanut oil
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 1 teaspoons red pepper flakes (optional, adjust to taste)

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Cook the linguine according to package directions and drain well.
2. While the pasta is cooking, clean and cut the broccoli. Microwave it in a covered dish, with just a splash of water, for 2-3 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, add all of the sauce ingredients to a medium-sized saucepan and warm them up on medium heat, stirring occasionally.
4. Meanwhile, drain the tofu and cut into small bite-sized pieces. Wash the tomatoes.
5. When the sauce is warm and blended together, add it to the noodles and broccoli and toss. Add the tomatoes and tofu.
6. Adjust the seasoning and taste.

## Day 5: Monday, February 18

### Include legumes/pulses in a meal or snack.

As mentioned above, along with nuts and seeds, participants in the original DASH studies had legumes/pulses 4-5 times a week, and more often in the OmniHeart study.

#### What the heck are legumes/pulses?

Dried beans, lentils, and peas. Call them what you like, they're great for your heart.

#### I never know what to do with them!

You're not alone. Once you get the hang of using these foods, you'll find that they're actually quite convenient, not to mention affordable.

#### But they give me gas!

Healthwise, there's nothing wrong with a bit of gas, but if it's uncomfortable, these tips might help:

- Eat small amounts frequently versus a lot once in a while
- Increase your intake gradually!
- Drink lots of water
- If you soak dried beans, change the soaking water once or twice, and don't use the soaking liquid to cook them.
- Cook dried beans thoroughly.
- Rinse canned beans, even if they're salt-free.
- Some people find the product "Beano" helps with gas.

#### Ideas!

- Legumes are widely used in chili and soups, but they can do so much more!
- Add a handful of canned beans, lentils, or chickpeas to a salad. How easy is that?
- Speaking of canned legumes, look for "no salt added" (eg. Blue Menu or Eden Foods). Otherwise, rinse well and you'll remove about half the sodium.
- Quesadillas and burritos with black beans (or other legumes) are a quick easy meal. Whole grain tortillas, right?
- Hummus is a spread made out of chickpeas.
- Chickpeas can also be roasted for a nutrient-packed snack.
- Pink/red lentils blend easily into soups and stews. You'll hardly know they're there.
- For great recipes using legumes, try the *Spilling the Beans* cookbook (Julie van Rosendaal and Sue Duncan) or Julie's website ([dinnerwithjulie.com](http://dinnerwithjulie.com)).

## Sweet Spot Favourite: Red Lentil & Sweet Potato Curry with Spinach

Source: Julie van Rosendaal ([dinnerwithjulie.com](http://dinnerwithjulie.com)) Can you tell I'm a fan?

Note: Make sure the sweet potatoes are cooked really well. I often let them simmer 15-20 minutes longer than the recipe says, or use the pressure cooker.

canola or olive oil, for cooking

1 onion, chopped

1 fresh jalapeño, seeded and finely chopped

1 Tbsp. grated fresh ginger

3 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tsp. curry paste or powder

1 tsp. cumin

1 tsp. turmeric

1/2 tsp. salt

1 medium dark-fleshed sweet potato, peeled and cut into 1/2" cubes

1/2 cup dry red lentils

1 14 oz. (398 mL) can coconut milk

1 cup water

a big handful of baby spinach leaves

1. In a large, heavy skillet, heat a drizzle of oil over medium-high heat. Sauté the onion for about 5 minutes, then add the jalapeño, ginger, garlic, curry paste, cumin, turmeric and salt. Cook for a few more minutes.
2. Stir in the sweet potato, lentils, coconut milk and water; bring to a simmer, then cover, turn the heat down to medium-low and cook for about 20 minutes, until the potatoes are tender.
3. Uncover and tear in the spinach; stir, return the lid and cook for another minute or two, just until the spinach wilts. Serve immediately, over rice.

## Day 6: Tuesday, February 19

### Have 2-3 servings of milk products today.

Milk, yogurt, and cheese round out our exploration of the DASH eating plan, and they can help you get more protein early in the day, which people often lack.

#### How much is a serving?

We're talking a cup of milk or yogurt or 50 g (1½ oz) of cheese.

#### Do I need to choose non-fat or low-fat dairy products?

The original DASH studies were conducted using mostly non-fat or low-fat dairy foods, although not completely – an ounce/30g of cheese daily was included. Because the DASH results have been so positive, many guidelines continue to suggest choosing low-fat milk products.

However, smaller studies performed since then with a DASH-like eating pattern and higher fat dairy have produced similar blood pressure lowering without problematic increases in cholesterol. Other studies support the idea that higher-fat dairy products don't increase cardiac risk and might actually be helpful.

The 2016 *“Canadian Cardiovascular Society Guidelines for the Management of Dyslipidemia for the Prevention of Cardiovascular Disease in the Adult”* quietly says that “some food sources of saturated fats, such as milk and dairy products and plant-based sources of saturated fats, have not been reliably associated with harm.”

**Bottom line:** Low-fat or fat-free is fine if you like it, but go with whatever fat level you prefer. It's not likely to make a big difference healthwise.

#### What if dairy isn't for me?

You can expect to get about twice the blood pressure lowering effect from a DASH eating pattern with dairy than without, but these are all just tools in your blood pressure toolbox. Use the ones that work for you.

Calcium-fortified milk alternatives like soy or almond milk may have a similar effect, although I'm not aware of a study verifying this. Soy has more so that's my preference. Either way, make sure they're fortified, and shake before drinking to distribute the calcium.

#### Ideas!

- Good news coffee lovers: A 350mL (12 oz) latte has about a serving of milk in it!
- Cottage cheese is unfortunately quite high in sodium. Still, it's a protein-rich option, so if you like it, just make sure the rest of that meal is low in sodium to balance.
- Sprinkling cheese on veggies hits two DASH foods at once.
- If you make a smoothie, include milk, kefir (fermented milk), or yogurt.
- Creamy Greek yogurt and Skyr (Icelandic yogurt) are excellent protein sources.
- *Plain* yogurt is ideal, and you can sweeten it yourself with fruit. Another DASH double-hit.
- A yogurt parfait can be a DASH triple hit, if you include fruit and granola.
- Add Greek yogurt to mashed potatoes for creaminess that packs a nutrition punch.

## Sweet Spot Favourite: Whipped Sweet Potatoes with Pecan Crumble Topping

Source: Dietitian Mary Kimbrough, RD, LD

Note: This is kind of a special occasion dish, but it combines several DASH foods, and it's delicious!

### WHIPPED SWEET POTATOES

3-4 sweet potatoes (about 8 to 9 oz each)  
1 1/2 cups plain yogurt, fat-free, Greek-style  
1/2 tsp vanilla  
1 tsp Kosher salt  
Cooking spray (butter flavor)

### PECAN CRUMBLE TOPPING

1/2 cup oats, whole  
1/4 cup pecans, toasted, chopped  
2 T butter, chilled, chopped  
2 T dark-brown sugar  
1/2 tsp cinnamon, ground  
1/8 tsp nutmeg, ground

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Wash sweet potatoes, pat dry, and place in oven on bottom rack.
3. Bake potatoes for approximately 40 to 60 minutes until soft to the touch when pinched. Roasting will allow the sugar in the potato to caramelize naturally. Remove potatoes from oven and allow to cool before removing skins.
4. While potatoes are cooking, prepare crumble topping by placing all ingredients in a bowl. Using a fork or the back of a spoon, mash ingredients together until all are well incorporated and hold together in small clusters. Reserve.
5. Place warm sweet potato flesh in a mixing bowl. Add yogurt, vanilla, and salt.
6. Whip using wire whip attachment on medium speed for about 1 minute. Scrape sides down and turn to high and whip for about 30 seconds until all of the yogurt is incorporated in potatoes.
7. Prepare glass or ceramic baking dish (1-1/2 to 2 quart) by covering surface with cooking spray. Scoop potato mixture into prepared baking dish. Sprinkle crumble evenly across top of potatoes. Lightly spray with cooking spray. Place in hot oven at 350°F for about 40 to 50 minutes to heat potatoes. The topping should be lightly browned. Remove pan from oven and serve.

## Day 7: Wednesday, February 20

### Make sure to keep your sodium under 2000mg today.

Shifting gears now away from the DASH plan. How can you be sure your sodium is under the 2000mg recommended by Hypertension Canada?

- Try to eat only foods made at home from scratch or minimally processed ingredients.
- Check the nutrition facts panel for any packaged food you have today. Remember to adjust if the serving size is different from what you'll have. If the sodium is below 120mg or 5% for, you're fine. If it's higher, do a quick calculation to ensure your meal is below about 500mg.
- Fresh/frozen fruit, vegetables, and meat usually have no label, but they're typically close to zero.
- If you want to be sure, google it: Google "chicken nutrition" or "carrot nutrition" and you'll usually find the nutrition information on the right-hand side of your screen. Adjust the serving size if needed.
- If you have to go out to eat, see if you can find the restaurant's nutrition information online. Most chains provide it. Try to find something under 500mg. (Good luck!)
- **Keener level:** You can add up the sodium in your day, item by item. Apps like MyFitnessPal are handy, but food items aren't always accurate for sodium. Doing it by hand, using nutrition facts panels and Google, is easier than you might think. Round numbers are fine.

### Sweet Spot Favourite: Chili-Rubbed Salmon

*Source: Real Simple magazine*

*Note: If you don't like salmon, you can use this with chicken or pork tenderloin. Even though this recipe includes salt, it only comes to 274mg of sodium.*

1-1/2 tablespoons chili powder  
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano  
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt  
1-1/2 pounds skinless salmon fillets (4 pieces)  
1 tablespoon olive oil

1. In a bowl, combine the chili powder, oregano, and salt. Pat the spices on the fish.
2. Heat the oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat.
3. Cook the salmon until opaque throughout, 4 to 5 minutes per side. (Reduce the heat if the spices begin to turn black.)

## Days 8-10: Thursday, February 21 to Saturday, February 23

The steps you'll take on these days don't require you to plan or shop for any special foods. If you like, you can have another go at all or some of the previous steps, but our focus will be on:

- Day 8, Thursday, February 21: **Get 30-60 minutes of moderate intensity exercise.**
- Day 9, Friday, February 22: **Check your vices: Alcohol, caffeine, smoking?**
- Day 10, Saturday, February 23: **Practice active relaxation.**