

# Recipes to fight heart disease

A new cookbook based on a US doctor's oil-free diet is out. **Joan Chew** finds out more

**A** new cookbook offers a range of recipes that keep to the no-oil, whole foods, plant-based diet advocated by retired American cardiac surgeon Caldwell Esselstyn.

The Heart Smart Oil Free Cookbook contains 47 recipes for drinks, breakfast food, soups, salads, snacks, main dishes and desserts.

It is intended for those who want to steer clear of coronary artery disease and existing patients who want to keep their condition in check.

Dr Esselstyn, a former Olympic gold-medal rower, wrote a book in 2007, *Prevent And Reverse Heart Disease*, which influenced former president Bill Clinton of the United States and inspired the 2011 documentary, *Forks Over Knives*. Former health minister Khaw Boon Wan told reporters he followed this diet soon after his heart bypass surgery in May 2010.

His diet programme avoids all animal-derived ingredients such as meat, fish, eggs and dairy products, uses no oil, nuts or refined grains such as white flour products and white rice.

Instead, it is based on fruit and vegetables, legumes such as peas and lentils, whole grains such as buckwheat and oats and beverages such as water, oat milk and non-fat soya milk.

Though the diet seems hard to follow, the authors of the book – nutrition consultant Mayura Mohta and Mr George Jacobs, volunteer president of the Vegetarian Society of Singapore – “believe that the spirit of Dr Esselstyn’s study is based on the premise that it’s better to be safe than sorry”.

Both authors chipped in four recipes and collected the rest from individuals, restaurants and non-profit organisation Singapore Heart Foundation.

Skilled chefs and global nutrition experts whose recipes are featured include India’s chef and TV show host Sanjeev Kapoor, Australia’s food philosopher Sherry Strong and resident nutrition expert for NBC’s Today show Joy Bauer.

Ms Lauren Ho, a dietitian and nutritionist with The Singapore Heart Foundation, gives a nutritional analysis of the recipes.

While testing the recipes for the book, Ms Mohta also included cooking tips and variations.

For example, the Thai green curry should be boiled on low heat to prevent the soya milk from curdling. For a spicy version, add green chillies.

The cookbook also talks about risk factors for coronary artery disease, ways to reduce these risks and how to keep to the diet when eating out and travelling.

## BENEFITS OF PLANT-BASED DIET

People who have high cholesterol have a greater



ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI  
**Ms Mayura Mohta, a nutrition consultant and health writer, with two of the dishes – buckwheat beet burgers (top) and mixed mushroom barley risotto – she contributed to The Heart Smart Oil Free Cookbook.**

chance of getting coronary artery disease.

Cholesterol levels are affected by one’s age, gender, genes and modifiable risk factors such as diet and physical activity.

Reducing the amount of saturated fat and cholesterol in one’s diet can help to lower cholesterol levels.

Saturated fat is converted into low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, commonly called bad cholesterol, which is distributed through the blood to tissues to make hormones.

In excess, it is deposited on artery walls, narrowing the arteries and raising one’s risk of developing heart disease.

The fat content in Dr Esselstyn’s plant-based diet is in the range of 9 to 12 per cent of the total calories consumed, with none of the fat derived from added oils or animal or dairy products.

This is far below the Health Promotion Board’s recommendation of keeping total fat intake to 20 to 35 per cent of total calories consumed.

Dr Esselstyn has shown that his diet, in conjunction with cholesterol-lowering medication, can stop the progression of coronary artery disease.

The study of 24 patients with triple-vessel coronary artery disease was published in The

American Journal Of Cardiology in 1999.

At five years, all 18 patients who stuck to the diet and medication had no disease progression and 70 per cent had disease regression.

Their mean total cholesterol decreased from 237 at the start of the study to 137mg/dL over five years. It reached 145mg/dL at the 12-year mark, although only one patient was continuing with the prescribed diet and medication by then. Doctors recommend that total cholesterol levels should be below 200mg/dL.

## BALANCED DIET STILL THE BEST

Associate Professor Carolyn Lam, a consultant at the cardiac department at National University Heart Centre, Singapore, called the results of the small study “promising”, but said they needed to be validated in large and diverse populations, with a longer follow-up period.

Dr Tan Chong Hiok, a senior consultant at Parkway Heart and Vascular Centre, said Dr Esselstyn’s study “goes against the basics of any good clinical study”.

It lacked a control group, had a “frightfully small” sample size and did not mention exercise, which has been shown to promote heart health.

He said it was also incorrect to “fully attribute” participants’ decrease in cholesterol to the diet, as it could just as well be due to statins, which are drugs that lower bad cholesterol.

The study also did not reveal how much patients’ plaque regressed, which would have been useful information.

Dr Tan said that when the LDL is decreased beyond 50 per cent, the benefit is marginal. The plaque progression can be halted, plaque regression can be seen, though by no more than 10 per cent. All of this can be achieved by using medication alone without following such a diet.

“I do think the diet plan is good. But it cannot be so enthusiastically preached at the expense of medication and exercise,” he added.

Dr Ong Hean Yee, head of the department of cardiology at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, who wrote the foreword, told *Mind Your Body* that Dr Esselstyn’s diet can be adopted by people “if they are able to tolerate it”. But he warned about the risk of developing vitamin B12 deficiency, a known consequence of a strict vegetarian diet which eliminates dairy products. This can be overcome by taking vitamin supplements if necessary.

And while Dr Esselstyn’s diet is healthily low in saturated fat and salt and high in dietary fibre, to omit low-fat dairy products, such as low-fat yogurt and milk which are good sources of calcium, is “uncalled for”, said Ms Liong Suet Mei, a senior dietitian at the National University Hospital.

“Research has shown that unsaturated fats, such as olive and canola oils, are beneficial to lowering cholesterol levels when they replace unhealthy fats such as butter and coconut fat.

“We also need essential fatty acids, albeit in small amounts, for membrane function. Healthy fats can be used in moderation in a cardioprotective diet,” she said.

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### Fans on making meals healthier

When preparing salads, rather than using salad dressing, I use yogurt. It tastes great and is very healthy.

**Vincent Lee Wee Ping**

I like to have soup for dinner. I prepare the stock in advance using chicken bones and leave it overnight in the fridge. The next day, I can easily remove the layer of oil.

**Jocelyn Lim**

I always use natural seasoning such as lemon or lime to get a sour taste, red date or sweet corn to make soups tastier, and black pepper or basil to bring out the fragrance of a dish.

**Buck Yeo**

My family adores this Turkish appetiser which comprises eggplant with yogurt and fresh tomato sauce. I cut down on the calories by grilling the eggplant instead of deep-frying it – eggplant absorbs a ton of oil – and by using low-fat yogurt.

**Umm Yusof**

French fries are one of my weaknesses, but they are deep fried and full of salt. I have come up with a healthier version.

Instead of white potato, I use sweet potato, cut into wedges or strips, tossed with extra-virgin olive oil, ground cumin, ground toasted fennel seeds, paprika and cayenne pepper, and baked in the oven for about half an hour. The herbs are tasty so no salt is needed.

**Sui Yin**

### WINNER

**Umm Yusof** wins a \$50 shopping voucher for the best post. The winner should e-mail her full name, address, e-mail address, identity card number and contact details to [sthealth@sph.com.sg](mailto:sthealth@sph.com.sg) by next Wednesday. Specify ST MYB Facebook as the subject.

[Facebook.com/STMindYourBody](https://www.facebook.com/STMindYourBody)

Though the diet could be difficult to keep to faithfully, some of its recipes have gone down well, even with non-vegetarians such as school counsellor Tarin Ong, 37.

She found it easy to prepare the soba noodles tossed with tomato, tofu and basil, which she shared with her boyfriend over dinner recently. She preferred this version to the cold soba noodles dipped in sauce offered in Japanese restaurants.

She said: “The taste of the soba was refreshing and not salty. It was suitable for my light palate.”

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*The Heart Smart Oil Free Cookbook (\$24 before GST), is available at major bookstores.*

*Visit Crossroads at*

*Kinokuniya Bookstores in Ngee Ann City to meet the authors from 4 to 5pm on Nov 17.*