

The strong beat of your heart



Preventing heart disease

Your heart is a muscle. You can do so many things to make that muscle stronger. You may not realize how some bad habits can harm your heart over time — and how some good habits can help your heart perform like a champion. Don't think about starting too late or doing too little. Your heart will be grateful for any improvements you make in being healthier.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends these practices to give you a strong heart to live and love longer.¹

1. Don't smoke

The link between smoking and heart disease is well documented. Cigarettes aren't just bad for your lungs, they can put you at much higher risk for developing coronary heart disease than non-smokers. Yes, it can be difficult to quit smoking but don't give up on giving up cigarettes — it's one of the most important things you can do to keep your heart healthy. Your healthcare provider can suggest ways to help you quit. If you don't smoke, don't start.

2. Do more cardiovascular exercise

Regular, moderate-to-vigorous aerobic activity can help you maintain a healthy weight and lower your blood pressure, blood cholesterol and blood glucose levels and reduce the risk of heart disease. To lower the risk for heart attack and stroke, experts recommend doing at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity, such as brisk walking, throughout the week. That is the equivalent of 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week. Don't have that much time to set aside during the day? No problem. You can do two or three segments of 10 to 15 minutes per day and still get good health benefits.

The heart loves physical activity, which is any activity that makes the heart and lungs work harder. That covers a lot of fun activities to try, indoors and out: walking, running, biking, swimming and even jumping rope.

3. Get regular physical activity

People who have excess body fat have a higher risk for heart disease. Carrying extra weight can put extra stress on the heart and blood vessels. Use an online body mass index (BMI) calculator to find out if your weight is in a healthy range or consult with your doctor about finding a healthy weight that's right for you. Many people struggle with losing weight, but it's one of the most important things you can do to keep your heart healthy.

4. Manage your cholesterol

Cholesterol is a substance the body produces naturally. But some people produce too much of it, and others add to their cholesterol with poor lifestyle choices. Too much cholesterol can “clog up” blood flow to the heart muscle with a buildup of plaque on the inner walls of the heart’s arteries. This plaque buildup can lead to a condition called atherosclerosis, which causes the arteries to narrow and harden. Fortunately, most people can actively reduce their cholesterol levels through a combination of diet and exercise. It’s not just about cutting back on foods that are high in cholesterol. You should also cut back on foods that are high in saturated fat and choose high-fiber foods that can help lower your cholesterol.

5. Manage your blood pressure

Blood pressure is the force of the blood pushing against blood vessel walls. Your blood pressure can rise temporarily from stress, or high blood pressure can be a chronic, sustained condition. Either way, you probably won’t be able to tell your blood pressure is elevated unless you check it with a blood pressure monitor. If your blood pressure remains elevated, it increases the heart’s workload and contributes to developing atherosclerosis. There are many lifestyle changes you can make that can help lower your blood pressure: losing weight, increasing physical activity and using less salt in your food. However, if your blood pressure doesn’t come down and stay down through lifestyle changes, it is extremely important to see your doctor.

6. Take your medications as directed

If you take medicine to treat high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure or diabetes, follow your healthcare provider’s instructions carefully. Always ask questions if you don’t understand something. Never stop taking your medicine without first talking to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. Work with your healthcare team to prevent and treat the medical conditions that can lead to heart disease.

7. Manage your diabetes

If you’ve been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, studies suggest that you may be at a higher risk for developing heart disease and stroke. But your risks are even greater if your blood sugar is not well controlled. If you have diabetes, monitor your blood glucose levels carefully. Whether or not you’re on medication for diabetes, lifestyle changes can help you better manage your diabetes. The top lifestyle changes for people with diabetes are maintaining a healthy weight, following eating recommendations for diabetes and getting regular exercise.

8. Choose healthy foods and drinks

Be sure to eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables and fewer processed foods. Eating lots of foods high in saturated fat and trans fat may contribute to heart disease. Eating foods high in fiber and low in saturated fats, trans fat and cholesterol can help prevent high cholesterol. Limiting salt (sodium) can lower your blood pressure and limiting sugar can help prevent or manage diabetes. Do not drink too much alcohol, which can raise your blood pressure.

Sources:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Prevent Heart Disease, April 21, 2020. Available from www.cdc.gov.

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