



February is National Heart Month

SHOW YOUR HEART SOME LOVE!

With Valentine's Day quickly approaching, we are now seeing red, pink, and purple hearts in every display window and on every store's candy aisle or card section. While you're contemplating what to get your sweetheart for this lover's day, we want to remind you that February is also National Heart Month. This is the time to call attention to heart disease and take steps to ensure that your heart will be beating strong for your Valentine for many years to come.

Did you know that in the United States, the leading cause of death for both men and women is heart disease? It kills about 610,000 people in our country every year. Heart disease is responsible for about 1 of every 4 deaths, and of the 735,000 Americans each year who have a heart attack, about 525,000 have never had a heart attack before. Every 40 seconds, someone in the United States is having a heart attack. Every minute, more than one person in our country dies from a heart disease-related event.

While these statistics are scary, it is important to know that you can significantly reduce your risk for heart disease by implementing meaningful changes in your lifestyle. Some of these suggestions may seem easier to accomplish than others, but even making small changes can have big impacts. You have to start somewhere, so here are some steps to get you started toward a healthier heart.

HEART HEALTH TIPS

1 If you smoke, stop. Take a smoking cessation course or talk to your doctor about different methods that can help you kick the habit.

2 Make healthy dietary choices. According to the United States Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, in addition to exercise, choosing lean meats and poultry, incorporating fruits and vegetables into your meals, and avoiding calorie-dense foods that have little nutritional value may help you to achieve a healthier weight and a healthier body. This is another way to reduce your risk of heart disease, as obesity is listed as another major risk factor.

3 Drink less alcohol. Studies have proven that excessive alcohol consumption is linked to negative impacts on heart health. Issues such as increased or irregular heart rate, atrial fibrillation, elevated blood pressure, and weakening of the heart muscle are all types of damage resulting from regular heavy drinking. Alcohol has also been shown to cause heart attacks and strokes. If you are concerned that you may be an alcoholic, talk to your doctor or reach out to an anonymous support group for help.

4 Work to lower your cholesterol and blood pressure. If you have been diagnosed with either, then talk to your doctor about ways you can begin to lower your cholesterol and blood pressure in order to lower your risk of heart disease. Many people find success in lowering both cholesterol and blood pressure by making dietary changes, but only your doctor is qualified to determine whether you may also need medications to accomplish this.

5 If you are mostly sedentary, start moving. Exercise is not only good for your heart, but it also can reduce your weight, which in turn will also lower your risk.

6 Eliminate stress! Not only does stress raise your blood pressure, which is in itself a risk factor for heart disease, but it also has been shown in studies to actually change the way our blood clots, putting us at even greater risk for heart attacks. People who do not learn positive ways to manage their stress are more prone to heart disease, chest pain, high blood pressure, and irregular heartbeat.

7 Dealing with stress in a healthy way is vital. Turning to smoking, snacking when you're not really hungry, or other unhealthy habits that people sometimes use to alleviate anxiety can exacerbate the problem. Instead, try going for a walk outside, meeting a friend or neighbor for coffee or tea, and looking for other ways to connect with people or to channel your stress without hurting your body. You should take some time for yourself every day—listen to music, relax, read a book, meditate, or pray. Avoid stressful situations or taking on more responsibility than you really should. Be okay with telling people “no” sometimes when they ask you to do things that you know will add additional stress to your life.

8 If you have diabetes, talk with your healthcare provider about how to properly manage it. Diabetes is a risk factor for heart disease that can be managed quite well through diet and/or medication but requires the advice and oversight of a medical professional.

Some people are at a higher risk for heart disease based on their age or family history. If you are a woman over 55 or a man over 45, your risk is higher. Also, if you are a man whose father or brother had heart disease before 55 or a woman whose mother or sister had heart disease before 65, then you are at greater risk. If you find yourself in one of these categories, keep in mind that there are many ways to prevent heart disease. In addition to the tips listed previously, ask your doctor about taking daily aspirin to lower your risk. This is not an option for everyone, so your doctor should be consulted to find out if this is a good choice for you or not. Some people, age 40 to 75, take statins if they are at high risk for heart attack and stroke. Your doctor can answer questions about this and whether it is an appropriate treatment to address your risk.

You can greatly reduce your risk for heart disease by choosing to live a healthier life. Keeping your heart beating strong will be the best Valentine's Day gift you can give your sweetie this year. Perhaps you can both make these lifestyle changes together!

