

You've Gotta Have Heart" - Tips to a Healthy Heart

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Febbruary is Heart Month. While most people think of romance, February is also a time to think about heart health. According to the American Heart Association, in 2003 there were over 71 million Americans with one or more forms of cardiovascular disease such as heart failure, coronary artery disease, stroke, and high blood pressure. That same year cardiovascular disease claimed 910,614 lives, representing 37.3 percent of all deaths or 1 of every 2.7 deaths. If it sounds like a lot, you're right. However, death from cardiovascular disease actually declined over 22% between 1993 and 2003, which means there's hope. Every day researchers make great strides towards eradicating this indiscriminate killer. Even with a family history of heart disease, everyone can do a great deal to stave off heart disease. To give yourself a healthier heart, follow these tips from Anthony DeMaria, M.D., Director of the Sulpizio Family Cardiovascular Center at the University of California, San Diego Medical Center.

- → If you smoke, quit now. Approximately 20% of all heart disease deaths in the U.S. are directly related to cigarette smoking. That's because smoking is a major cause of coronary artery disease. A person's risk of heart attack increases significantly according to the number of cigarettes smoked daily. The longer a person smokes the greater the increase in risk of heart attack. People who smoke a pack of cigarettes a day have more than twice the risk of heart attack than non-smokers. Women who smoke and also take birth control pills increase several times their risk of heart attack, stroke and peripheral vascular disease. The California Smokers Hotline at 1-800-7-NO-BUTTS provides free confidential smoking cessation counseling.
- → Exercise regularly. Aim for at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity three days a week, preferably more. Besides being a great stress reliever it can significantly reduce risk for heart disease. While you're at it, incorporate light lifting. Resistance training builds lean muscle which helps the heart to run more efficiently.
- → Maintain a healthy weight or achieve one if overweight. Extra pounds put a person at higher risk for heart disease.
- → Consume lots of fruits and vegetables, especially those rich in potassium which has been shown to lower blood pressure in people potassium-deficient. Fruits and vegetables are also

low in fat and cholesterol.

- → Make foods rich in folic acid and the B vitamins a part of your daily diet. Some research has shown that they may help protect blood vessels. Several studies have found that people with unusually high homocysteine levels (an amino acid) appear to be at higher risk for heart disease and stroke. There is some evidence that folic acid and other B vitamins help break down homocysteine.
- → The fat found in fish like salmon and tuna is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which can help protect your heart. The power of omega-3s appears to be their ability to lower blood fats and prevent blood clots associated with heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends eating at least two servings of fish, especially fatty fish, at least twice a week. Unlike fish which should be fatty, eat only lean cuts of meat. You need protein, but not the artery-clogging form of fat found in animal meat.
- → Speaking of fat, you need some fat in your diet. Research has found that a moderate amount of unsaturated fat, such as olive or canola oil is good for the heart. However, avoid the artery busters - saturated fats such as butter, margarine, sour cream, soft cheeses and cream cheese. Limit fat intake to 20 to 30 percent of your total daily calories.
- → Mom was right – eat your fiber and lots of it. Consume 25-30 grams of fiber a day. It helps lower cholesterol and lower risk of heart disease. Enjoy at least three servings a day of whole grains: whole wheat; barley; rye; millet; quinoa; brown rice; wild rice; and whole-grain pasta, breads, and cereals.
- → Think antioxidants. Doctors now know they play a role in lowering cholesterol levels and preventing heart disease. Start consuming sweet potatoes instead of white ones. They're full of phytochemicals including beta-carotene, vitamins C and E, folate, calcium, copper, iron, and potassium. Tomatoes pack a nutritional wallop with ingredients such as lycopene, a key antioxidant, vitamins A and C, and potassium. Berries deliver a powerful dose of health-protecting antioxidants. According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture study, blueberries top the list of antioxidant-rich fruits, followed by cranberries, blackberries, raspberries, and strawberries. The color of berries comes from the pigment anthocyanin, an antioxidant that helps neutralize "free radicals" (cell-damaging molecules). Berries, particularly cranberries, may also help ward off urinary tract infections.
- → Go nuts. Nuts are a good source of protein, fiber, selenium, vitamin E, and vitamin A. The fat in most nuts is *unsaturated*. Cashews, almonds, and peanuts are loaded with monounsaturated fats, and walnuts are rich in a form of omega 3 fatty acids, polyunsaturated fats similar to the oils found in fish like salmon. Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats have been shown to lower LDLs (low density lipoproteins), or so-called bad cholesterol which can gum up blood vessels and increase the danger of coronary artery disease. Nearly a dozen

controlled studies have shown that when volunteers add nuts to their diets, their LDL levels declined by as much as 12%.

- → Put away the salt shaker and reduce your salt intake. Too much sodium contributes to high blood pressure, a leading cause of heart failure and stroke.
- → Always have aspirin handy. Its anti-clogging ability prevents blood clots and with physician approval, should be taken daily by individuals at risk of a heart attack as well as those experiencing the first signs of heart attack.
- → If you have a family history of diabetes or are overweight, get checked for diabetes. Increased blood sugar levels can be a factor in developing heart disease.
- → Know the signs of heart attack: Chest discomfort, discomforts in the upper body, uncomfortable pressure or squeezing, shortness of breath, cold sweats, nausea or lightheadedness. Immediate treatment can save a life and greatly affect recovery. Just as important, know the signs of heart failure: fatigue, activity intolerance, congestion and edema. Always have a ready copy of your medical history and your medications.
- → If you don't already, get to know your family history. If your mother, father or grandparents suffered from any form of heart disease before the age of 60 you too are at risk for developing the disease. Take steps to control risk factors such as weight, types of food consumption and blood pressure.
- → Find ways to cope with stress. Tension, frustration, anger and sadness can trigger or worsen heart conditions. One good way is to own a pet. They're well known for helping relieve stress. Consider visiting the local animal shelter and giving Fido or Rocky a new home. Not only will you be doing a good thing for the animal but studies have shown that pet owners have better blood pressure and cholesterol profiles than non-owners.

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