

Improve Your Heart Health with These Tips

While most people associate February with Valentine's Day, it's also American Heart Month, which offers an opportunity to deepen our knowledge and understanding of how to keep our hearts healthy as we celebrate our love.

According to the Centers for Disease for Control and Prevention, heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women. About 600,000 individuals will die from heart disease in the U.S. alone each year—that's about one in every four deaths. The term heart disease covers a number of conditions including coronary artery disease, heart attacks and heart failure, among others. The good news is that heart disease is preventable and there are a number of simple ways to keep ourselves healthy for years to come.

You Are What You Eat

A heart-healthy diet can be delicious and simple to follow. Eating healthy doesn't mean dieting; rather, it's about incorporating better choices each day, which may also help you reach and maintain a healthy weight. A little nutrient know-how is important and a great place to start is the nutrition label. Many of us think we know what we're eating until we actually look at the nutritional information. Making heart-healthy food choices means that we need to pay attention to portion size per serving, saturated fat, fiber and sodium.

Portions in Proportion

Being aware of what constitutes a portion can help you maintain a balanced diet while managing your weight. The USDA's ChooseMyPlate program can help you choose correct portion sizes in proportion to the various food groups. This program emphasizes the importance of incorporating more fruits and vegetables to help you fill up on fewer calories and consume vital nutrients that play an important role in regulating blood pressure.

The Fat Trap

Not all fats are created equal. Saturated fat (mostly from animal origin) should be kept to no more than 10 percent of total calories. Similarly, trans fats, which are typically added to a processed-food product to extend its shelf-life, should be consumed minimally, if at all. These fats are found mostly in the form of partially hydrogenated oils and should ideally be replaced with healthier mono- or polyunsaturated sources typically found in olive, canola and sunflower oil or in foods such as avocados, nuts and seeds.

Your Friend Fiber

Choose fiber-rich foods including plenty of whole grains, fruits and veggies. Aim for breads and cereals that have a minimum of 3 or more grams of fiber per serving. Oat bran, found in certain cereals and abundantly in old-fashioned oatmeal, is a wonderful addition to any breakfast lineup as this particular fiber is especially helpful in lowering LDL ("bad cholesterol") levels.

Sodium: A Salty Subject

Most of us should consume around 1,500 mg of sodium each day. Unfortunately, the typical American diet contains about three times that amount and it's not necessarily from being heavy-handed with the salt shaker. We consume a majority of our sodium from ready-prepared, processed and restaurant foods. Lowering sodium intake can help keep our blood pressure under control.

Get Moving

Increasing physical activity while reducing sedentary behaviors is an effective way to lower your cardiovascular risk factors. The U.S. Surgeon General recommends that most adults should include at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise each week. If you're currently sedentary and your doctor feels it's safe for you to do so, begin by slowly incorporating more activity into your daily life. This doesn't mean you have to hit the gym every day, but with a little regular physical activity you'll find it easier to control your weight and reduce hunger, while also decreasing your risk of chronic disease.

If you find yourself struggling to sneak in exercise altogether, here's some food for thought:

Find Your Passion

Finding enjoyable ways for fitting in activity each day is an important factor when it comes to exercise. Most of us are unwilling to do things we dislike and visa-versa; when we find an exercise that's enjoyable, we're more likely to work it into our busy schedule. So find an activity that interests you and go for it.

Seek Opportunities

Look for ways to be active. Whether that means parking farther from a building entrance, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, or even leaving your car at home altogether to run an errand in your neighborhood—it all adds up.

Prioritize

Make certain that you treat yourself as well as you do those around you. Oftentimes our lives are filled with "have to do's" and deadlines that seem to take the focus off our own needs. Make sure your personal health is up there on your priority list.

American Heart Month helps us understand that a heart healthy lifestyle is within our grasp. With a healthier eating plan and regular physical activity, you'll not only reduce your risk of heart disease, you'll also feel so much better knowing you've taken the extra steps to improve the quality of your life. For more ways to get heart healthy, check out the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Heart Month website.

www.acefitness.org