

Heart Health

February is American and Canadian Heart Health Month. This is a time when we highlight the need to remind people that heart disease remains the number one killer of Americans and the second leading cause of death in Canada. The American Heart Association, as well as other organizations, works tirelessly to educate people on best practices for a healthy heart.

Your heart is designed to pump oxygen and nutrient rich blood throughout your circulatory system. This powerhouse of a muscle is only about the size of your fist. It expands and contracts 100,000 times a day, pumping about 2,000 gallons of blood to organs and every other part of your body. If you live to be 80 years old, your heart will have served you with about 3.4 billion beats.

Hydration is an important component of heart health. As a muscle, the heart is composed of about 75% water. The blood rushing through the heart has greater water composition, approximately 90%. Caffeine and alcohol can dehydrate blood and muscle tissue, so it's best to limit your intake of these beverages. Drinking plenty of water, about two liters, every day is key for maintaining a strong and healthy heart.

Dehydration may contribute to stiffer blood vessels. If this happens, the heart has to work harder to push blood out to organs and extremities. Also, if blood is dehydrated, it becomes sticky and the flow becomes slower and more difficult for the heart to manage. The simple act of drinking water each day can improve heart function dramatically.

Eating food filled with fiber, vitamins, nutrients, and healthy fats can lower your risk of heart disease. A heart-healthy diet includes foods that are low in saturated and trans fats, added sugars, preservatives, and sodium. Avoid highly processed fast foods, and instead reach for true food in its natural state. This includes whole grains, fruits, and vegetables as well as healthful fat like we get from olive oil, fish, avocados, and nuts.

Exercise is important for all the hundreds of muscles in your body, but perhaps none more than cardiac muscle. Most doctors recommend adults get 150 minutes per week of moderate activity. Walking is a heart healthy activity. Walking at a brisk pace strengthens your cardiovascular system, respiratory system, and muscles. Regular exercise is also a proven stress reliever. Stretching after your walk is good to ensure your muscles cool down without becoming too tight. Walking, as well as other forms of exercise, improves quality of sleep. Getting the right quantity and quality of sleep is a must for total health.

Regular check-ups with your doctor are important for detecting potential problems that may present a threat to your heart. Blood pressure medication is one of the most common prescriptions written for patients, especially as they age. Taking these medications as prescribed can be life-saving.

The health of your heart is important and is primarily your responsibility. There's no time like the present to make a commitment to eat well, drink plenty of water, exercise and make sleep a priority. These simple steps can relieve fatigue and give you renewed energy, enthusiasm, and hope.

