Take Care of Your Heart and It Will Take Care of You

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the US and is the second leading cause of death in Canada. February is heart health month, and our hearts play a critical role in our physical well-being and our overall health. The heart pushes millions of gallons of blood to every part of the body. This steady flow carries with it oxygen, fuel/energy, hormones, nutrients and other compounds, and a host of essential cells. It also whisks away waste products. [1]

Many factors can contribute to heart disease, including our own genetics. Being intentional about lifestyle changes, however, can reduce our risk. The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute recommends several ways we can take action toward better heart health[2]. Among those suggestions are:

- Having positive, close relationships with others
- Increasing physical activity
- Eating a heart-healthy diet
- Knowing and controlling your heart health numbers
- Getting quality sleep
- Reducing stress
- Cutting out smoking and vaping
- Maintaining a healthy weight

Moving more can lower risk factors such as "bad" LDL cholesterol and high blood pressure. Increased activity also helps to improve blood flow, energy and our ability to cope with stress. Start by making small changes. Consider 10 minutes of exercise a few times each day instead of trying to find larger chunks of time to work out each day. Aim for at least 150 minutes each week. Keeping up weekly activity by using a log or a fitness tracker can increase our motivation levels, and pairing up with a friend or co-worker can establish accountability for achieving our activity goals.

Healthy diets that are low in sodium and saturated fats can help us improve our heart health. Eating veggies, fruits, whole grains, fish, poultry, nuts and beans provides us with essential nutrients and protein. Limiting sugar (including artificial sweeteners) is also beneficial. When we eat out, consider sharing a meal with a friend or family member or choosing a side salad instead of chips or fries. Avoid all-you-can-eat meals. Small choices can make big impacts!

Managing our heart health numbers is vital. Tracking blood pressure regularly, whether at our regular doctor's visit or at the store's blood pressure kiosk can help identify abnormalities. Cholesterol checks with your doctor at your annual physical are just as important. And lastly, for those with diabetes, managing blood sugar levels is critical. Consult with your physician, who can tell you what your target heart health numbers should be.

Keep that heart in good health! With a healthy heart, we can experience improved immunity and fewer chronic illnesses, lower our risk of stroke or heart attack and enjoy more energy.

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[1] Harvard Medical School, "Heart Health," Accessed on January 11, 2024, https://www.health.harvard.edu/topics/heart-health

[2] National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, "Take Action Towards Better Heart Health," Accessed on January 11, 2024, https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/education/heart-truth/lets-work-together-prevent-heart-disease