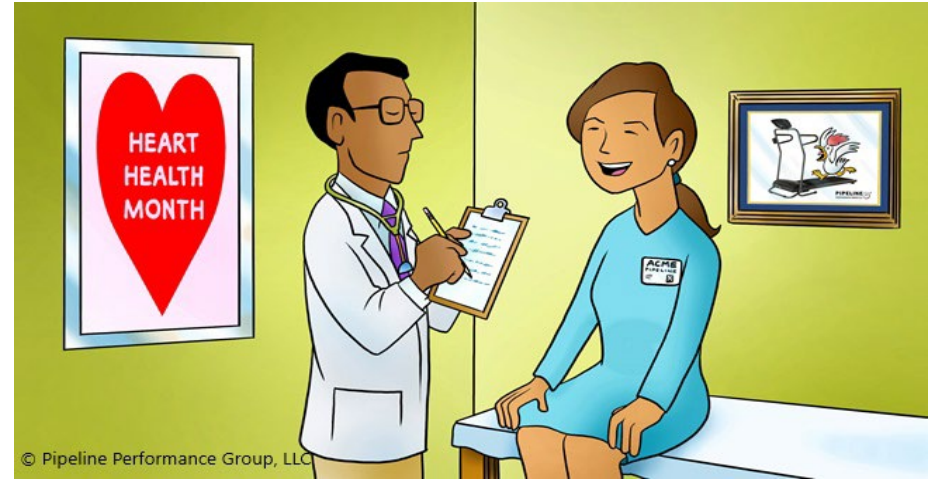


Heart Health

Both the United States and Canada observe Heart Health Month in February. In Canada, the emphasis is on raising awareness about cardiovascular health and promoting ways to *improve* it. In the US, the focus is on heart disease and prevention strategies, which is particularly important because heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the US, yet it can often be prevented.

Heart health is at the ‘heart’ of our overall wellness. Living a heart-healthy lifestyle involves understanding your risk factors, making healthy choices, and taking steps to reduce your chances of developing heart disease, particularly coronary heart disease, which is the most common type. By taking preventive measures, you can lower your risk of heart disease and potentially avoid a heart attack. Additionally, improving your heart health can enhance your overall health and well-being¹. Don’t know where to begin? Here are some tips to help you get started:

- **Get enough quality sleep.** Aim for 7 to 9 hours of sleep per night and maintain a consistent sleep schedule. Avoid caffeine and nicotine. Exercise regularly, but not within 2-3 hours before bedtime.
- **Eat well.** Follow the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan for heart health². Read nutrition labels to choose healthier options. Incorporate lean meats, fish, and plant-based meals into your diet. Opt for healthy snacks like fruits, yogurt, and vegetables.
- **Stop smoking.** Set a quit date and plan your strategy. Seek support from healthcare providers, programs, and support groups. You can also contact resources like 1-800-QUIT-NOW and smokefree.gov for assistance.
- **Maintain a healthy weight and be more active.** Keep a food log to track your eating habits and promote accountability. Stay hydrated by drinking water. Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate or 75 minutes of vigorous activity each week. Incorporate more movement into your daily routine, such as taking the stairs, walking, and alternating between standing and sitting. Include muscle-



- strengthening activities like lifting weights, yoga, and resistance bands. Even short bursts of activity can be beneficial if you're short on time.
- **Control cholesterol and blood pressure.** Eat a heart-healthy diet that is low in saturated fats and limit alcohol consumption. Regularly check your blood pressure and keep a record of your readings. If necessary, seek assistance from a healthcare provider to identify appropriate medications to help lower cholesterol and regulate blood pressure.
 - **Manage blood sugar.** Eat a balanced diet rich in whole foods and complex carbohydrates. Monitor your carbohydrate intake and blood sugar levels.
 - **Manage stress.** Use relaxation techniques. Consider journaling, meditation, or yoga for stress relief and mindfulness. Seek positive social connections.

Do your heart a favor! Schedule your annual physical and make it a goal to include at least one positive action for your heart health each day. And if you need help getting started, the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) offers a helpful visual tool called “28 Days Towards a Healthy Heart” (<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/resources/28-days-towards-healthy-heart>).

¹ What is Heart-Healthy Living? <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/heart-healthy-living>, updated April 23, 2024.

² DASH Eating Plan, <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/education/dash-eating-plan>, updated December 29, 2021.