How to get–and stay–heart-healthy

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February is American Heart Month, an important time to think about your heart's health and learn more about how to get, and stay, heart-healthy.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States and impacts approximately 26.6 million Americans. About half of the U.S. population has at least one key risk factor for heart disease, including obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and smoking. However, there are a number of steps you can take to reduce your risk and improve your heart health.

- **See your doctor for a check-up –** It's important to get regular check-ups to help identify any conditions that could potentially lead to heart issues, such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol. By identifying these issues early, it is possible to manage them effectively and avoid more complicated problems later on.

- **Eat a nutritious, balanced diet –** By incorporating more healthy foods like fruits, vegetables and whole grains into your diet, it's possible to improve the factors that can lead to heart disease. In addition, focus on fresh foods and try to avoid foods high in sodium, saturated fat and cholesterol.

- **Be active –** Exercising regularly can help you lose weight or maintain a healthy weight, which can help improve some of the risk factors for heart disease like high cholesterol and blood pressure. Aim for at least 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity exercise to get the most benefit, and try to incorporate both cardiovascular and strength training exercise, which can help increase your levels of good cholesterol.

- **Take steps to reduce stress –** Too much stress can raise your blood pressure, which over time can increase your risk for heart disease. Make sure to take time for yourself each day to do something you enjoy or just relax to keep stress levels under control.

- **Quit tobacco –** Smoking greatly increases your risk for developing heart disease, and even exposure to second-hand smoke increases the risk of heart attack by nearly 70 percent. Talk to your doctor about options to help you quit smoking; it can help improve your health as well as those around you.

- **Get enough sleep –** Studies show that people who sleep fewer than seven hours a night are more likely to die of heart disease than those who are better rested. When you don't get enough sleep, you tend to be more stressed (and stress can lead to lack of sleep!), leading to higher blood pressure. Make sure to de-stress before going to bed in order to get enough sleep to feel well-rested and able to tackle the next day.

While these steps are important to improving your heart health and reducing your risk of developing heart disease, they can also help improve your overall health. By taking one step at a time, you can make great strides toward preventing heart disease.

The impact of stress on your heart

Although more research is needed to determine exactly how stress can impact your risk for heart disease, one thing is for certain: it may affect certain behaviors that increase the risk of heart disease, such as drinking alcohol, overeating, or smoking cigarettes to manage stress. Read on to learn simple strategies to help you keep stress in check!

- **Practice positive self-talk.** Instead of dwelling on negative thoughts, remind yourself that you're doing enough, you don't have to be perfect, and that you can do it!
- **Get enough sleep.** If you're not sleeping soundly, your mood, ability to solve problems and make decisions, energy level, and physical health may all be affected.
- **Do something creative.** Adult coloring books are all the rage right now, and coloring can help you feel calmer. Not into coloring? Try drawing or writing in a journal.
- **Try exercising.** Physical activity can not only keep you healthy—it can also alleviate stress. Even a simple activity like walking is a good stress reliever.
- **Find a relaxation technique that works for you.** Things like mindfulness meditation, tai chi, yoga, or deep breathing can all help you feel calmer.
- **Be prepared.** Sometimes feeling stressed is due to not being properly prepared for situations. Make an effort to leave your home with enough time so that you get to work and other destinations on time. Manage your time effectively so that you can meet deadlines.
- **Improve your time management skills.** If you're frequently stressed out due to work and/or family demands, these skills can help you balance your duties better.
- **Treat yourself.** Doing something nice for yourself can help you reduce stress. Try cooking yourself your favorite meal, going to get a massage, buying yourself a new book, or whatever makes you happy!
- **Avoid multitasking.** No matter how demanding of a job you have, doing things one at a time is the best course of action. When you multitask, you don't always focus well on any of the tasks and it can feel more stressful and chaotic.
- **Breathe deeply.** When you are having a stressful moment, turn it into a peaceful, calming moment with some deep breathing.

Strengthen your resilience

Resilience is a personal strength or attribute that allows you to handle setbacks, manage stress, overcome adversity, adapt to change and maintain a "never give up" attitude. Try these tips to help you strengthen your resilience!

- **Take care of yourself.** You should be your number one priority. Practicing proper self-care is a necessity for resilience.
- **Manage your stress properly—**this is the foundation of resilience. If you're unable to manage stress effectively, you may have a difficult time being resilient.
- **Seek social support.** Having social connections can help you maintain positivity and respond to challenging situations with resilience.
- **Build your self-efficacy.** Confidence in your ability to do things helps to promote resilience.
- **Maintain a positive self-image.** Knowing your strengths can help you conquer your weaknesses!
- **Practice gratitude.** Appreciating what you have and the people in your life can help you maintain social connections, be confident, and increase your optimism!
- **Find purpose in your life.** Knowing your purpose and living your life with intention helps to increase your self-awareness.
- **Quiet your mind.** Overthinking can reduce your self-efficacy and hinder your ability to overcome challenges.
- **Accept and adapt to change.** You can't control change; the only thing you can control is your response to it!
- **Keep calm under pressure.** Stay level-headed by managing your emotional and physical responses to challenging situations.
- **Learn from failure.** Life isn't going to always work out as you'd like it to. Recognizing that you aren't always going to succeed can help you learn and grow stronger.
- **Know how to solve problems** in a rational manner. Thinking through problems without getting your emotions too involved can help you identify a sound solution.
- **Be proactive, not reactive.** Recognize when trouble is ahead and address it before it becomes an overwhelming problem.
- **Know when to seek additional help.** Accepting that you cannot always deal with something on your own and recognizing when you need to involve others is critical to resilience.