

Put a Little Love in Your Heart

Learn how to take care of your heart and keep it healthy.

Valentine's Day is approaching, so take care of your heart. We don't mean watch your step in love and romance. We mean take care of that organ that beats inside your chest.

Those omnipresent red-shaped hearts signal the anniversary of lovers, but think of them, too, as a reminder of American Heart Month. During this national observance, held appropriately in February, the American Heart Association (AHA) wants people to know there are things they can do to reduce their risk of coronary heart disease (CHD) - the single largest killer of men and women in this country. Every minute, someone dies from CHD, according to the AHA.

Most heart disease is caused by arteriosclerosis, an accumulation of cholesterol-laden plaques within artery walls, which begins in young adulthood and becomes more prevalent with advancing age. If you're a smoker, have high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and/or have a family history of CHD, you are at even greater risk for heart disease. The more risk factors you have, the harder you are on your heart.

You can't stop the clock and you can't change your family history; however, you can do something about the other risk factors for heart disease. According to the AHA, those risk factors you can change, treat or modify include:

- Smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke
- High blood cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Physical inactivity
- Obesity and being overweight
- Diabetes

Stop smoking

Quitting smoking is one of the best things a person can do to prevent coronary heart disease. Smokers' risk for heart attack is more than twice that of nonsmokers. The AHA considers cigarette smoking to be the single greatest risk factor for sudden cardiac death; smokers have two to four times the risk of nonsmokers. Also, smokers who have a heart attack are more likely to die and die suddenly (within an hour) than are nonsmokers. Evidence also indicates that chronic exposure to second-hand smoke may increase the risk of heart disease.

If you find it difficult to quit on your own, check out a smoking cessation program or ask your doctor whether nicotine gum, patch or spray might be for you. A nicotine-free pill Zyban (bupropion hydrochloride), is also available by prescription. The pill reduces the urge to smoke and controls the moody, irritable or depressive feelings that smokers often experience when they stop smoking.

Lose the weight

Next to smoking, being seriously overweight is one of the greatest risk factors for CHD. People who have excess body fat are more likely to develop CHD and stroke even if they have no other risk factors. Obesity not only puts a strain on the heart but it can raise blood pressure and blood cholesterol and make diabetes more likely to develop - all of which increase the risk of CHD.

The AMA recommends achieving and maintaining a "desirable" body weight, that is, a body mass index (BMI) between 21 and 25. A BMI assesses a person's body weight relative to height. In studies by the National Center

for Health Statistics, BMI values from 18.5 to 24.9 are classified as normal. A BMI of 30 or higher - the equivalent of about 30 pounds overweight - is considered obese.

If you are seriously overweight and can lose as little as 10 to 20 pounds, you can still help lower your CHD, according to the AHA.

Modifying your diet and making exercise a regular part of your lifestyle are important first steps in weight control. Also, weight loss can often control blood cholesterol and diabetes and can help lower blood pressure. If these changes alone are not enough, doctors can prescribe medication to treat each of those conditions.

The AHA's recommended diet for a healthy heart has two components - it features foods low in saturated fats (a chief culprit in raising blood cholesterol) and rich in fiber. The average American man consumes about 360 milligrams of cholesterol a day; the average woman between 220 milligrams and 260 milligrams.

The AHA advises limiting average daily cholesterol to less than 200 milligrams. Cholesterol is found in foods that come from animals, such as meats, poultry, fish, seafood and dairy products. Foods from plants, such as vegetables, grains, nuts and seeds, do not contain cholesterol.

Start an exercise program

When it comes to exercise, surveys show Americans just don't get enough - 54 percent of adults get some exercise, but they don't do it regularly or intensely enough to protect their hearts. The AHA says even low-to-moderate exercise, such as walking, dancing and gardening, done for as little as 30 minutes a day can bring benefits.

More vigorous aerobic activities, such as brisk walking, running, swimming, bicycling, roller skating and jumping rope, done three or four times a week for 30 to 60 minutes are best for improving the fitness of the heart and lungs, according to the AHA.