

Nutrition News

Department of Human Nutrition



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Adopt Habits for Heart Health

Heart disease and strokes are by far the leading causes of illness and death in the U.S. Most adults could improve their heart health by changing one or more of their daily habits. Consider the list of habits below, and note which ones you might change for “the health” of it.

Lifestyle medicine is the best way to prevent disease

Behaviors for a heart-healthy lifestyle, according to a recent statement by the American Heart Association, include:

- Not smoking (and avoiding tobacco exposure)
- Keeping blood pressure at less than 120/80 mm Hg
- Keeping total blood cholesterol at less than 200 mg/dL
- Being moderately physically active for at least 150 minutes each week, or at least 75 minutes per week if doing vigorously intense activity
- Avoiding excess body weight. Keep your body mass index, or BMI, less than 25 kg/m². That would be equivalent to less than 150 pounds for a person who is 5'5" tall, or less than 175 pounds for a person who is 5'10".
- Keeping fasting blood glucose at less than 100 mg/dL
- Keeping waist circumference at less than 39 inches for men, and less than 35 inches for women
- Keeping blood triglycerides at less than 150 mg/dL
- Keeping blood HDL cholesterol at more than 40 mg/dL for men, and more than 50 mg/dL for women
- Eating a heart healthy diet

How to eat a heart healthy diet?

For someone needing about 2,000 calories a day, the guidelines include, but are not limited to, consuming:

- 4 1/2 or more cups of fruits and vegetables per day
- 2 servings of fish, preferably oily fish, each week
- 3 or more ounce-equivalent servings of whole grains per day
- 1,500 or less milligrams (mg) of sodium per day
- 36 or fewer ounces of sugar- or syrup-sweetened beverages per week
- 4 or more servings of nuts, legumes and seeds per week
- 2 or fewer servings of processed meats per week
- 15 or less grams (g) of saturated fat per day
- No or low amounts of *trans* fat per day

Primordial prevention of heart disease

Preventing whole societies from experiencing epidemics of the risk factors, as well as preventing individuals from developing risk factors in the first place, is known as “primordial prevention.” Although this term is new to many people, the strategy of promoting healthy behaviors for this purpose is quite common. Unfortunately, putting healthy behaviors into practice is still very uncommon.

Only 5% of the people who live in the U.S. follow all of the features of an ideal heart-healthy lifestyle. Consistently choosing even one of the heart healthy behaviors substantially lowers risk of heart disease and stroke.

Why is this important?

The life-years and quality of life lost because of heart disease and strokes, along with medical costs, are enormous. Improving heart health in the entire population would help reduce these illnesses by preventing the development of risk factors and of medical problems, such as heart attacks.

Individuals who put heart-healthy lifestyle behaviors into practice can expect:

- Greater health-related quality of life in older age
- A longer period of time without illness
- Compression of illnesses to the end of the lifespan
- Substantially lower healthcare costs later in life
- Postponed death from heart-related and all other diseases – including cancers, diabetes, and chronic lung and kidney diseases

It’s not enough to simply review the list! Help your heart by asking your health care provider which would be the most important habits for you to change.

Source:

Lloyd-Jones DM et al. 2010. Defining and setting national goals for cardiovascular health promotion and disease reduction: The American Heart Association’s strategic impact goal through 2020 and beyond. *Circulation* 121:586-613

For more information about healthy eating, contact your local extension office.

The Food Assistance Program can help people of all ages with low income buy nutritious foods for a better diet.

To find out more, call toll-free 1-888-369-4777.

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