



10 steps to a healthy heart

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Hear disease is one of the leading causes of death in most developed countries. Fortunately, it isn't unavoidable. There are a number of steps you can take that will keep you from becoming one of the victims.

Implementing the 10 steps will take determination and persistence, but if you follow them, there's a good chance that your heart will keep functioning well into your retirement.

1 know your numbers

Knowledge is power, especially when it comes to heart disease, because heart problems can be prevented or treated successfully when they are detected early. High cholesterol and high blood pressure are two of the most significant risk factors for heart disease.

Therefore, you should have regular checkups so that you are familiar with your blood pressure and cholesterol readings and can identify your areas of risk. Knowing which lifestyle choices reduce your blood pressure and blood fats can not only reduce your risk of heart disease, but can also significantly boost your quality of life. While factors such as age and gender are beyond your

control, you can control your weight, exercise and diet.

2 manage your weight

Excess body fat puts considerable stress on your heart and is closely linked with high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. Also, it isn't just what you weigh but where you carry your weight that determines your level of risk.

Fat stored in and around your tummy and internal organs (resulting in a potbelly or an "apple" shape) makes you more prone to heart problems and diabetes. Fat stored internally is called visceral fat, and it has even stronger links with type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

You can have visceral fat even if you're thin. Maintaining a healthy level of body fat and losing excess body fat if necessary, is one of the most important lifestyle strategies you can adopt to reduce your risk of heart disease.

3 include some physical activity each day

Like all muscles, the heart becomes stronger from regular exercise, helping it to deliver blood more efficiently

throughout the body. It's been said that if exercise was a drug, it would be the most heavily prescribed treatment in the world. That's because exercise, or physical activity, offers a range of significant health benefits to your heart, including reduced blood pressure, improved cholesterol levels and weight management. Moderate exercise also helps to boost your immune system and increase your circulation.

Start any new exercise program at a slow and steady pace, and build up your duration over time. Make sure to always warm up and cool down, and see an exercise specialist if you have any doubts.

4 eat a Mediterranean-style diet

A number of countries around the Mediterranean Sea have very healthy diets, including Greece, Spain, Morocco, southern France and parts of Italy. While people from these countries have many variations in what they eat, there are also some important commonalities. These include a strong emphasis on olive oil (not butter and animal fats) for cooking, plenty of fresh vegetables, nuts, legumes and whole grains.

A Mediterranean diet is high in fibre, rich in antioxidants and low in saturated fats, yet it includes healthy fats such as omega-3 fatty acids and mono-unsaturated fats. A Mediterranean diet is known to prolong life and reduce the risk of suffering from a variety of illnesses, such as heart disease, diabetes and obstructive sleep apnea.

5 improve your management of stress

Stress can have a dramatic influence on your heart health and quality of life. It will increase your heart rate and blood pressure, which over the long term can trigger burnout and depression. You can't experience optimum health if you're unhappy with your job, your relationships, your children, your finances, your relatives, your neighbours or other worries that dominate your thinking.

During times of stress, people may also find it hard to resist high-fat foods such as chocolate, ice-cream, biscuits, cakes and pastries. This sets up a vicious cycle for your health, where stress makes you feel lethargic, leading to bad food choices and inactivity. Learning to manage your stress can help to counter some of these negative effects, and these very factors will help to prevent stress in the first place!

6 cut out bad fats

Saturated fats directly elevate your risk of heart disease by increasing your LDL (bad) cholesterol levels and are primarily responsible for the sticky platelets in your blood that can form dangerous clots in your arteries. Saturated fats are found in fatty meats, full-fat dairy products and fast foods.

Trans fats are man-made fats that are formed during food manufacturing as vegetable oils become solid fats. These are known to increase the bad LDL cholesterol levels and decrease the good. Trans fats are found in biscuits, pies, pastries, muffins, breakfast bars, popcorn, cakes and fried foods, as well as margarines that aren't labelled low in trans fats.

You don't have to eat a very low-fat diet to be heart healthy. It's the *kind* of fats you consume that have the biggest impact on your heart.

7 don't smoke

Cigarette smoking has a profound ill effect on your health. There is an undeniable body of evidence to demonstrate that smoking increases the risk of illness and death from heart disease,

stroke and lung cancer. Smoking constricts blood vessels, increasing the risk of heart and vascular problems such as angina, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. In fact, smokers are at an increased threat of coming down with at least 40 different illnesses and conditions that can reduce the quality and quantity of your life.

Smoking is the number one preventable cause of death. Lifetime smokers can expect a reduction of up to 15 years in life expectancy, and one out of two smokers dies from the habit. On the other hand, there are countless health benefits from quitting. No matter how old you are or how long you've smoked, you will improve your health, fitness and appearance when you quit.

It's also important to avoid places and situations where you will be exposed to second-hand smoke, as this can be very dangerous to your health as well.

8 moderate your salt intake

Salt is sometimes referred to as "white death" due to its strong association with an increased risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. According to one World Health Organization report, high blood pressure is the world's leading cause of death and disability. Too much salt can also increase your risk of kidney stones, stomach cancer and osteoporosis.

Salt helps to regulate the balance of water in the body (among other functions). However, excess salt in the diet increases the salt content in the blood. This triggers the kidneys to retain more water in the blood vessels in an attempt to keep the salt concentration balanced. The extra water in your arteries increases the stress on your heart and triggers higher blood pressure. Add less salt to your foods and avoid packaged foods that are high in salt.

9 load up on fibre

Dietary fibre is a component of plant foods that is resistant to digestion and it is especially abundant in fruit, vegetables, legumes and grain-based foods. Soluble fibre (found in foods such as oats, legumes and psyllium husks) soaks up bile acids that are used to make cholesterol, thus helping to lower cholesterol in the blood.

Fibre also plays a significant role in weight control. Fibre-rich foods tend to be more filling per kilojoule, which can help reduce your food intake. Fibre increases the need for chewing, which promotes a sense of fullness by decreasing the rate at which you eat



facts on heart disease

Heart disease is the leading cause of death globally. It not only impacts the length of your life, it also affects the quality of your life.

More people than ever are living with heart disease. It's estimated that one in four Australians over the age of 25 has high blood pressure.

Heart disease kills five times more women than breast cancer.

More than 50 per cent of people who died suddenly from a heart attack had no signs or symptoms of heart disease.

and increases the release of gastric juices that swell your stomach. Fibre also slows down the rate at which glucose is released from foods during digestion, so there is less need for the sugar- and fat-storing hormone insulin. Over the long term, this could improve insulin sensitivity and even improve fat oxidation, where your body uses a higher proportion of fat as fuel.

10 colour your diet

Vibrant colours in foods can be a good guide to fruit and vegetable selection because colour usually corresponds with more vitamins and antioxidants. Antioxidants such as vitamins C, E and beta-carotene may play a preventive role in aging and the development of heart disease by neutralising free radicals.

Free radicals damage your cells, while antioxidants protect them and can boost heart health. Include an array of different coloured fruits and vegetables, such as red, green, orange, yellow and white. A rainbow of colour adds to the visual appeal of your food and provides a variety of nutrients. It's also one of the best ways to boost your heart health. ↻

Adapted from *Healthy Heart for Life* (Sydney, Australia: HarperCollins Australia, 2011).
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