

Heart Smart

Keep your ticker in tip-top shape with these tips

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Heat disease takes the lives of 610,000 Americans each year, making it the No. 1 killer of both men and women. While those stats are pretty scary, they can also empower you to take action. Research shows people can avoid most heart attacks and strokes by adapting some simple lifestyle strategies, says Tracy L. Stevens, MD, a cardiologist at Saint Luke's Mid America Heart Institute in Kansas City, Mo.

Move more. The American Heart Association recommends moderate-intensity aerobic exercise for at least 150 minutes a week. If that sounds like a lot, just aim to move more than you do right now, Stevens says. Wear a pedometer so you can see how your steps add up, march in place during TV commercials, and walk instead of sitting when talking on your cellphone, Stevens suggests.

Eat real food. The easiest way to improve your diet? "Eat foods without nutrition labels," Stevens says. That means minimizing anything that comes in a box or bag and focusing on lots of fresh vegetables, fruit, and lean protein.

Watch your waist. A big belly puts you at risk for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, and other conditions. A waist circumference of 40 inches or more if you're a man or 35 inches or more if you're a woman spells danger. And aim to keep your overall weight down. Most Americans have a body mass index (BMI) that puts them in the overweight or obese category, which raises heart disease risk, Stevens says. A healthy BMI is between 18.5 and 25.

Get stress in check. Stress can make your blood vessels constrict and cause the plaque in your arteries to rupture, leading to a heart attack or stroke, Stevens explains. "You can't get rid of stress, but you may have to make some tough decisions to deal with it," she says. Fixes can range from practicing yoga to leaving a job that takes a toll on your mental and physical well-being.

Ditch the cigarettes. Smoking is terrible for your lungs, and it's awful for your heart, too. "I



tell patients that smoking is like rubbing broken glass on the inside of your arteries," Stevens says. "Nicotine use is the No. 1 predictor that your first heart attack will be fatal." Smokers are more likely to end up with erectile dysfunction, amputated limbs, and a host of other problems.

Stay on top of screenings. See your doctor regularly to have your cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood sugar monitored. Your doctor will tell you how often you need to have these tests, based on your personal risk factors.

High blood pressure accounts for 1,000 deaths a day in the United States, and 90% of Americans will have high blood pressure in their lifetime. But this problem is usually a silent killer, since most people don't notice any symptoms. That's why Stevens urges everyone to test themselves at home at least monthly and discuss any problems with a doctor. A normal reading is under 140/90.

"My dream is to have a blood pressure cuff in every home," she says.



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