

Share Your Love: Take Care of Your Heart

How do you share your love with your family and friends? We often share our love during February through heart shaped candies and cards, but this is also a month when we can share our love by taking control of our Heart's Health. February is recognized as American Heart Month, a perfect time for all of us to learn about and improve our heart health.

Did you know there are steps you can take to improve your heart health? Take notice this month of whether you are practicing healthy eating, getting regular physical activity, eliminating smoking and use of tobacco products, and managing your cholesterol and blood pressure numbers.

Your blood pressure numbers are an important sign of your heart's health. High blood pressure (hypertension) is often referred to as the "silent killer" because there are no visible symptoms as it quietly damages blood vessels. Alarmingly, 36% of adults have high blood pressure, which is the leading risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

One way to keep track of your heart health is to know your blood pressure number and check it regularly. A "healthy blood pressure" number is really two numbers. One number is the pressure in your blood vessels when the heart is contracting (squeezing). The other number is the pressure in your blood vessels when your heart is relaxed (between squeezes).

In November of 2017, new blood pressure guidelines were released by the American College of Cardiology and the American Heart Association. These guidelines lowered the definition of a healthy blood pressure, so that a healthy blood pressure is now defined as a pressure that falls below 120/80 when you are at rest.

Since the healthy blood pressure number is lower with the new guidelines, more people may learn that they are really at risk for health problems caused by high blood pressure. The guidelines emphasize the importance of making lifestyle changes that will reduce high blood pressure.

Lifestyle changes that improve blood pressure include: eating a well-balanced, low sodium diet, reaching for a goal of at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week, maintaining a healthy weight, maintaining moderate alcoholic intake, and managing stress. In addition, quitting tobacco use is an important way to reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke.

How can you find out your blood pressure numbers? In addition to your primary care provider's office, there are a number of pharmacy and community locations that have free blood pressure stations. You can also check your blood pressure yourself, at home.

The new blood pressure guidelines encourage self-monitoring of blood pressure so that you know whether you are at risk for heart disease and can begin to make changes. If you want to begin to check your own blood pressure, it is important that you have proper training – including information about high blood pressure, how to select blood pressure monitoring equipment, how and when to use the equipment, and how to record and track results.

For accurate blood pressure readings, follow these tips:

- Avoid smoking, caffeinated beverages, or exercise within 30 min before taking the measurement
- Take at least five minutes of quiet rest prior to taking the measurement
- Sit with your back straight and supported
- Sit with your feet flat on the floor and legs uncrossed
- Keep your arm supported on a flat surface (such as a table), with your upper arm at heart level

There is a great new program in our area to help people learn how to measure their blood pressure and to help them make lifestyle changes to reduce their high blood pressure. In an effort to improve heart health, South Heartland District Health Department is partnering with the Hastings Family YMCA to promote the YMCA's Blood Pressure Self-Monitoring program.

People enrolled in the YMCA's program will check and record their blood pressure at least twice a month over a period of four months. Research shows that this habit will lower blood pressure in many people with hypertension.

Participants in the program work with trained Heart Health Ambassadors to learn the proper technique for taking their own blood pressure accurately. Participants also learn to identify trends and patterns in their blood pressure numbers and will work toward making blood pressure self-monitoring a habit.

The program also offers personalized support and tips for cardiovascular health and healthy eating. Nutritional seminars highlight how the food you eat affects your blood pressure and helps you learn how to make heart healthy food choices.

Currently there is no cost for the program and YMCA membership is not required to participate. For more information you may contact the Hastings Family YMCA or South Heartland District Health Department.

This February, share your love by taking care of your heart's health!

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