

Make Your Heart a Healthy Heart

As we turn the calendar to February, our attention often goes to that upcoming celebration of love and affection, Valentine's Day, but for over 50 years we have been asked during this month to also think about our heart health.

February is American Heart Month, a month designated to promote heart health, raise awareness about heart disease and educate Americans about the fact the heart disease is the leading cause of death and that it is largely preventable.

Heart disease, also called cardiovascular disease, is a term used to define several types of diseases that affect the heart and blood vessels including coronary artery disease (a disease in which a waxy substance called plaque builds up inside the arteries of the heart), stroke, hypertensive heart disease (a result of high blood pressure causing thickening of the heart muscle), irregularity in heart rate called arrhythmia and heart attack.

Every 40 seconds, an adult dies from heart attack, stroke or an adverse outcome of cardiovascular disease. These account for about one third of all deaths in the United States. About 1 in 5 of these deaths is a person younger than 65.

There are a number of ways to prevent heart disease including diet, physical activity, not smoking, stress reduction, and control of blood pressure and cholesterol.

DIET

A heart healthy diet begins with eating a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are a good source of vitamins and minerals as well as low in calories and rich in dietary fiber

An overall healthy diet emphasizes whole grains such as whole-grain bread, whole-grain pasta, and grains such as brown rice and barley, all good sources of fiber and nutrients that play a role in regulating blood pressure.

Lean meat, poultry and fish, low-fat dairy products, and eggs are some of the best sources of protein.

Limiting the amount of saturated and trans fats in a diet is an important step to reduce blood cholesterol and lower the risk of coronary artery disease.

Reducing sodium is also an important part of a heart-healthy diet

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Physical activity can reduce many of the risk factors to heart disease, including high blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels, high blood pressure, diabetes, pre-diabetes and obesity. Any exercises that raise the heart rate and keep it elevated for at least 20 minutes, are exercises that can help prevent heart disease. To benefit overall heart health, current guidelines recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week. For more information on nutrition and physical activity, visit the CDC's website www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/index.htm.

SMOKING

Avoiding smoking and exposure to second hand smoke is another means to reduce the risk of heart disease and heart attacks. Smoke triggers buildup of plaque in the arteries, increasing the risk of blood clots forming in the arteries. Heart disease risks associated with smoking begin to decrease after quitting smoking, and continues to decrease over time.

STRESS

Stress and anxiety may also cause heart disease. Studies suggest long-term stress results in the high levels of the stress hormone cortisol, increasing cholesterol, triglycerides and blood pressure, all risk factors for heart disease.

BLOOD PRESSURE

High Blood Pressure is often called the “silent killer” because, most of the time, it has no obvious symptoms to indicate that something is wrong. Blood pressure numbers of less than 120/80 mm Hg are considered within the normal range.

High blood pressure and high cholesterol cannot be cured, but it can be managed effectively through lifestyle changes and, when necessary, with medication.

CARDIAC REHAB

Prevention efforts are always the best when facing heart disease, however over 5% of adults in Nebraska report being diagnosed with coronary heart disease or have had a heart attack. Fortunately, medically supervised cardiac rehabilitation (rehab) is available following a heart attack, other forms of heart disease or surgery to treat heart disease.

According to Jan Williams, RN, BSN, Manager of Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehab at Mary Lanning Healthcare, the goal of cardiac rehab is to prevent further disease progression and reduce risk factors. Cardiac rehab consists of both an exercise and education component. A safe exercise plan is developed around the individual’s limitations, focusing on target heart rates, and the education is specific to the individual’s risk factors. The cardiac rehab consists of two programs, monitored and maintenance. Monitored patients wear a cardiac monitor during their exercise sessions. Those in the maintenance program continue to participate as part of their healthy lifestyle change-

With one in every four deaths in the United States a result of heart disease, now, during American Heart month, is the time to think about your heart health. Are you doing everything you can to make your heart a “healthy heart”?

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