

It's Your Only Heart - Love on it!

Most people think of February as the month of love – and there are heart shapes everywhere to promote it!

Please join me this month to focus on loving our *own* hearts. This February, during American Heart Month, I would like to pass along some tips for taking care of our hearts. I'll also share some information about diabetes and our hearts.

Why should we take care of our hearts? One answer is because cardiovascular diseases are affecting so many of us. Cardiovascular diseases are costing lives and impacting our families. There are also costs in health care dollars and costs to emergency response and health care resources. In fact, about 12% of all U.S. health expenditures (about \$422.3 billion in 2019-2020) are due to cardiovascular diseases.

What are cardiovascular diseases? These are conditions resulting from a substance called plaque building up in our arteries – these conditions include coronary artery disease, chest pain, heart attacks and strokes. Strokes may lead to disabilities such as paralysis and speech difficulties; while heart failure may result in fatigue and difficulty with physical activities.

In Nebraska, about 1 in 12 adults have been diagnosed with a cardiovascular disease. Nationally, heart disease and stroke are leading causes of death, with one person dying every 33 seconds from cardiovascular disease.

Sadly, if you have diabetes, you are two to four times more likely to have heart disease or a stroke than if you don't have diabetes. (According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, up to 20% of deaths from heart attack and 13% of deaths from stroke are related to diabetes or prediabetes.)

So – please, love on your heart! Find out if you are at risk for cardiovascular disease and make a change!

A first step is to ask yourself if any of these risk factors apply to you: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, physical inactivity, unhealthy diet, diabetes, smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, high levels of stress and family history of heart disease or stroke. If the answer is yes, consider making a change starting this month.

A next step is to check your ABCs:

A is for the A1C test. The A1C test shows you your blood sugar (called glucose) levels. High blood sugar levels can harm your heart, your blood vessels, kidneys, feet and eyes - and high blood sugar levels are a risk factor for diabetes.

B is for Blood Pressure. High blood pressure makes your heart work too hard. It can cause heart attack, stroke, and kidney disease.

C is for cholesterol. One kind of cholesterol, called LDL, can build up and clog your blood vessels. It can cause heart attack or stroke.

For all of the ABCs – ask your health care provider what your numbers are, what they should be and what you can do to reach your ABC goals.

If you are at risk for cardiovascular disease, you can take steps to manage your A1C, blood pressure and cholesterol. Many people are able to lower their risks to a healthy range by making lifestyle changes, such as:

- Keeping a healthy weight
- Making healthy food choices (Eating a healthy diet, including limiting sodium (salt) and alcohol)
- Staying Active (Getting at least 150 minutes of physical activity each week - about 30 minutes each day for 5 days each week)
- Quitting smoking
- Managing stress

To find locations to get your blood pressure measured or get an A1C test; or to take a diabetes risk assessment; or for tips on being more physically active or making healthier food choices – speak with one of our staff at the South Heartland District Health Department or visit our website:

southheartlandhealth.ne.gov.

This February, South Heartland challenges you to love your own heart! Keep it healthy for those who love you by taking one step this month to reduce your risk for cardiovascular disease. It's your only heart – love on it!

Michele Bever is the Executive Director for South Heartland District Health Department, serving Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster Counties. She may be reached at 402-462-6211 or toll free at 877-238-7595.