



February

Member Newsletter

Sneaky Things that Harm Your Heart

The pandemic has turned our day-to-day routines upside down, making it all too easy to slip into bad habits without realizing it, including those that can harm the heart. Some examples: sitting for extended periods, forgoing balanced meals while filling up on high-calorie comfort foods, and enduring unrelenting stress. February, which is heart health month, is an ideal time to take stock and get back on track to habits that protect your heart. **Try these tips:**

 **Keep moving!** Even if you exercise for an hour a day, the fact is that prolonged sitting itself has been associated with worse health outcomes, including heart disease. Try to move every hour if possible. Stand up and sway from one foot to the other while folding laundry, walk while on the phone, dance during TV commercials, etc.

 **Focus on fiber.** If your daily wardrobe has featured mostly sweatpants and now your expanded waistline keeps you from buttoning your jeans, the culprit may be months of consuming high-calorie, high-fat foods, like butter, cheese and fatty meats. On the other hand, eating more soluble fiber foods like apples, peas, beans, bran, oatmeal, barley, nuts and seeds could help you accumulate less belly fat.

 **Cut back on salt.** Just one heavy, high-sodium meal can elevate blood pressure. Aim to pile your plate with salad and vegetables first to help limit your salt intake. Use herbs and spices to flavor your food.

 **Curb “over-snacking.”** Try these tips: If you’re craving a snack, divert your attention—get up and drink some water. Limit your snack choices to fresh fruit or veggies, air-popped popcorn, or no-added-sugar fruit pops. Or, dole out a single (small!) serving of chips and put the rest away. Better yet, limit bringing snacks into the house in the first place!

 **Keep stress in check.** Stress constricts blood vessels, which can raise blood pressure and releases the cortisol hormone, which encourages the storage of body fat and is linked to hardening of the arteries, heart attack and stroke. While you may not be able to control a traffic jam or other stressful situation, you can quiet your body’s response. Listen to relaxing music, take slow deep breaths, or look up at the clouds and let worries float away.

 **Don’t skimp on sleep.** Turn off that alluring TV series, shut down your devices and aim to get at least 6 to 9 hours of sleep nightly. Adults who sleep less than 6 hours a night have a 48% greater chance of developing heart disease and a 15% greater chance of stroke. <https://www.thoracic.org/patients/patient-resources/resources/sleep-deprivation.pdf>

 **Do your daily floss!** Flossing helps remove bacteria from the gums, which can travel to the bloodstream, inflame blood vessels, and cause other heart problems. See your dentist every 6 months for checkups.



Keeping your heart healthy can also help you maintain the health of the rest of your body

Team up with your doctor for heart health

The heart is the most important organ in the body. Keeping your heart healthy can also help you maintain the health of the rest of your body, as many chronic conditions stem from issues that affect the heart such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol. A critical part of heart health is teaming up with your primary care doctor to understand how to navigate heart health. **Here are some important questions to ask your primary care doctor about the health of your heart.**

1. What are some risk factors for heart issues that may directly affect me?
2. Are there any medications or supplements that I take that can either help or possibly hurt my heart?
3. How often should I have important heart health screenings such as blood pressure checks, cholesterol and triglycerides, etc.?
4. Based on my risk factors and health status, are there any additional tests I should have to check my heart?
5. When is it necessary to see a cardiologist?
6. What additional steps should I take to help keep my heart healthy?
7. Are there any specific exercise or nutrition tips you would recommend based on my risk factors and health status?



If you're a tobacco user:

Tobacco is the leading cause of preventable death and disability in the U.S. Smoking is especially detrimental to the health of your heart. If you're a tobacco user, talk to your doctor about a plan for quitting. They can help you understand what nicotine replacement therapies and medications are available that may help increase your chances of quitting tobacco for good.

Forging Healthier Relationships

The uncertainty, constant disruptions and other challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have strained relationships, especially emotionally intimate relationships. The stress can prompt short tempers and other behaviors that undermine the affection we feel for one another—a foundation of good health. No matter your situation, making even small efforts to nourish your relationships can help make them stronger and more satisfying. **Here are some suggestions.**

 **Commit to communicate respectfully.** Whenever feasible, when you are with family or friends, turn away from your phone or computer to sit down together, look directly at the person and stay focused on what they are saying. Avoid interrupting. Hear them out instead of rushing for your turn to talk, even though you may be preoccupied or disagree.

 **Work on ways to talk about difficult feelings in a collaborative, helpful way.** Especially if you tend to overreact or take things personally when discussing hot button subjects, this will help you avoid automatically feeling threatened and fueling a conflict.

 **Feeling overwhelmed during the conversation?** Take a pause. Use calming techniques. Mention that you need a time out, step away and engage in activities—like counting to 10—that help cool your temper.

 **Practice patience.** Consider if you're frequently mentally ticking off every misstep of your partner or family member, thinking, for example—"Wow, he walked right by the overflowing trash can." Try to make adjustments and show support if the person seems to be having a bad day or not at their best. It's key for helping someone feel unconditionally loved.

 **Find ways to maintain trust.** One way is to avoid saying things or making promises you don't really mean or can't follow through on just to be polite or keep the peace.

 **Show appreciation.** Whether saying "thank you" to your coworker, picking up coffee for the friend driving you to an appointment, or taking the kids out so your partner can get work done—all of these gestures of gratitude and generosity help solidify relationships with the people we care about.

 **Keep finding new ways to connect.** Even if you need to keep distance from a close friend physically, look for a joint effort toward something rewarding. This could be an adventurous walk, a shared lifestyle change toward healthier habits, or expanding your minds together through discussing books, movies, or podcasts. All can help strengthen your bond.

For more help, talk to Health Advocate, your health practitioner or a licensed counselor.

Health Observance

Often considered to be a condition of the older generation, heart disease and other associated illnesses are on the rise across all age groups. That's in part due to the effects of COVID-19 that have impacted healthy habits like diet, exercise, socializing, keeping up with doctor appointments and medical treatments that all help to keep the heart healthy. To find out what you can do to protect your heart health at any age, visit: https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/any_age.htm