



## Attend to Heart Health in February and All Year

February is Heart Month. Time to scrutinize your habits and align them with a heart-healthy lifestyle. Heart healthy lifestyle changes made during the year's shortest month can deliver long-term dividends. Some important areas that influence heart-health include diet, movement, stress levels, and existing health conditions.



Eating a nutritious diet helps keep your heart healthy and maintain a healthy weight. It also decreases the production of harmful LDL cholesterol that creates plaque, inhibits blood flow and may lead to a cholesterol-related stroke.

Translated into everyday life, a heart-healthy diet emphasizes fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains including whole wheat cereals, breads and other whole grains, limited quantities of dried fruits (raisins, apricots, prunes, etc. and nuts); low-fat or non-fat dairy products (yogurt, hard and soft cheese, and butter substitutes); broiled or grilled skinless chicken and fish; and limited quantities of beef and pork. Due to their generally high fat and salt content, go lightly on processed foods like luncheon meats, fast-food burgers and hot dogs, fries and chips. Instead, substitute bite-sized veggies like carrots, broccoli and cauliflower dipped in low-salt salsas. And don't forget plenty of crunchy salads, minus the high-fat dressings.

Consider your lifestyle. Are you a go-go, anxious Type A personality or a laid-back type? Studies show that stress-inducing situations cause elevated blood pressure. Ditto smoking, drug addiction and excessive alcohol intake. This is especially important if you have pre-existing conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, or heart problems like atrial fibrillation.

Diabetes exemplifies how one health condition presages poor circulation, high blood pressure or other heart-related issues. As these conditions develop, the risk for heart disease escalates. Upwards of 65 percent of people with diabetes die from either heart disease or stroke.

Identify stress-inducing situations and implement avoidance or coping strategies. If you have a meeting or a plane that requires travel on a traffic-heavy highway, leave 30 minutes earlier. Drive the route to an interview in an unfamiliar location the day before. Always leave some buffer time for an unexpected emergency like a flat tire or a last-minute change in plans.

For optimum circulation, balance and overall health keep moving. Weather cold? Walk in the mall with a friend. Don't like the outdoors? Take up golf, join the "Y" or a health club. Prefer being at home? Invest in a new or used rowing machine, exercise bike or elliptical machine.



Implementing a series of small modifications in February and sticking with them throughout the year guarantees big benefits later.