

Healthy ♥ Health You

The ease of accessing information on the Internet has tremendous advantages. However, contradicting findings can be quite frustrating and confusing, especially when it comes to figuring out the best way to stay healthy or to start a health program. The most important issue that arises is deciding on what changes would actually work best *for you*.

The tips below are general healthy heart guidelines that will benefit not only people who are just looking to maintain heart health but also those who would like to become more heart-healthy. Of course, readers with specific health conditions should discuss making any drastic changes to their lifestyle and nutrition with their licensed Naturopathic doctor first to ensure safety, success, and sustainability of maintaining these new changes.



Get at least 6-8 hours of restful, good quality sleep each night.

Studies show that sleeping less than 6 hours each night significantly increases the risk of stroke, heart attack, and congestive heart failure. Some sleep hygiene tips include avoiding electronic devices/watching television at least an hour before sleep; sleeping in a room that is completely dark and relatively quiet; avoiding heavy meals at nighttime; and establishing a sleep ritual to mentally and physically wind down your body for sleep.

Do not smoke or use tobacco and avoid secondhand smoke exposure.

Smoking can damage the structure and function of your blood vessels and increase the risk of plaque building in your vessels (atherosclerosis). This plaque, which hardens over time, can cause chest pain (angina), heart attack, heart failure, and irregular heart rhythms.



Get at least 30 minutes of exercise or fun movement every day.

Exercise not only strengthens your heart but also causes the brain to release endorphins (the “Happy Hormone”). Exercise can reverse some of the damage of even severe heart disease. Find something fun and interesting so you are motivated to stay with it. Brisk walking, jogging, riding bicycle, swimming, weight-lifting, playing team sports, and dancing are just some ways to get moving!



Regulate your Heart Rate Variability (HRV).

Heart Rate Variability (HRV) is the variation of heart beat-to-beat interval. HRV is mainly determined by the heart’s sympathetic (“fight, flight, freeze”) and parasympathetic systems (“rest & digest”). HRV measurements are actually powerful predictors of cardiovascular morbidity and mortality. Exercise, meditation, and biofeedback therapy can all help with increasing HRV, which decreases depression, anxiety, stress, and cardiovascular mortality.



Cultivate community and intimacy.

Whether you find a community based on religion, spirituality, politics, sports, reading, or any other hobby, the key to a healthy, happy heart is having a sense of belonging and support. Many studies have shown that people who have a strong caring connection and sense of community are much less likely to feel lonely and depressed and get sick and die prematurely.



Remember that teeth and gum health have great impact on overall heart health.

Regular brushing and flossing are very important in maintaining heart health. Because bacteria from the mouth can enter the bloodstream through the gums, they can easily clump in the plaques of arteries and directly cause blockage. Since periodontal disease may actually be an early sign of cardiovascular issue, bleeding or painful gums are warning signs to get yourself to a dentist and your doctor.



Eat a whole-foods diet with lots of fresh vegetables and little to no processed foods.

Phytonutrients found in fresh vegetables and fruits can prevent and repair damage to cells by clearing free radicals in the bloodstream which protects blood vessels. Having a variety of produce not only keeps your taste buds interested, but also nourishes you with a wide range of vitamins, minerals, and other micronutrients. Check out Environmental Working Group's Dirty Dozen List for information on which produce to buy organic or conventional:
<http://www.ewg.org/foodnews/>.

Know your Fats to eat.

Healthier kinds of fat include polyunsaturated, monounsaturated, and medium-chain triglycerides found in coconut oil. Various oils, nuts, seeds, and avocado offer a nice variety of healthy fats. Remember that a little goes a long way as calories can easily add up if weight loss is also part of your health goal.

- Pasture butter
- Ghee (aka clarified butter)
- Olive oil
- Macadamia oil
- Almond oil
- Sesame oil
- Coconut oil
- Brazil nuts
- Hearts of palm
- Avocado
- Walnuts, almonds, pine nuts, hazelnuts
- Nut/seed butters of walnut, almond, pecan, and sesame (tahini)
- Eggs (organic, free-range, Omega-3)

Eating fish twice a week has also been shown to help with not only heart health, but also with brain and cognitive function, skin disorders, asthma, macular degeneration, and severe autoimmune diseases. Check out "Monterey Bay Seafood Watch" for clean and sustainable seafood sources: http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/cr_seafoodwatch/sfw_aboutsfw.aspx.



Limit salt intake *only if you have high blood pressure and/or other health conditions that warrants doing so.*

We have all heard that a high-sodium diet can increase your blood pressure and also cause heart issues and stroke. However, there are several reasons in which salt should not be dramatically restricted in your diet. For example, individuals who drink only water during strenuous exercise without adequate sodium and other electrolyte replacement may end up with a low sodium level in the blood (hyponatremia). Symptoms include headache, confusion, mental state changes, nausea, vomiting, restlessness, muscle spasms or cramps, weakness and tiredness, and even seizures. Prolonged sweating, severe vomiting or diarrhea, adrenal insufficiency, hypothyroidism, liver failure, and certain medications can also cause hyponatremia. While I do not advocate adding more salt to your food after it has been served, most healthy individuals without blood pressure and/or other relevant health issues can be okay without drastically restricting their salt intake.



Limit alcohol intake.

While some recent reports show that a small amount of red wine have some heart-healthy benefits, drinking alcohol still does more harm than good. Individuals with heart disease, irregular heart rhythm, high blood pressure, diabetes, high triglycerides, and a history of stroke or obesity are definitely encouraged to refrain from drinking any alcohol. There are many other lifestyle and nutritional ways to strengthen your heart health.



Get regular health check-ups to make sure blood pressure and blood sugar levels are healthy.

High blood pressure damages the blood vessels due to the added force of blood hitting the artery walls. Injured arteries are also more likely to become narrowed and hardened by fatty deposits, which increases the risk for heart disease and stroke. Quitting smoking, maintaining a healthy body weight, regular exercise and limiting alcoholic beverages in your diet can all help with decreasing blood pressure.

High blood sugar raises blood pressure and heart rate, which can interfere with blood vessel function and contribute to heart disease. Adults with diabetes are 2 to 4 times more likely than adults without diabetes to have heart disease or stroke. It is important to make sure your blood sugar is within a healthy range to prevent diabetes and insulin resistance and to regularly check and maintain your blood sugar if you have diabetes.

Avoid trans-fats – found in commercial baked goods, many fried foods, shortenings and some margarines. Trans-fats have been shown to increase your "non-protective" cholesterol (LDL) and decrease your "protective" cholesterol (HDL) which is correlated to an increase risk for cardiovascular disease. Remember to read the nutrition label on your food packages and avoid items that have "hydrogenated oil" or "partially hydrogenated oil" listed.

Limit saturated fats – found mainly in red meat and whole-milk dairy products including cheese, sour cream, ice cream, butter. Choose grass-fed beef (which actually contain Omega 3 fatty acids) and lean cuts of meat.

Avoid oxidized cholesterol – cholesterol has been assumed for decades as a main cause for heart disease and other health problems but many studies show that a decreased cholesterol level actually increases the mortality in advanced heart failure and has even been linked to major depression and suicide. The plaque that forms in blood vessels are made of oxidized cholesterol which can occur when cholesterol is cooked/burned in high temperature. As an example, eggs have gotten a bad rep due to the high cholesterol content found in the yolks. To avoid oxidizing the cholesterol, cook eggs in water by poaching or boiling them.