



Ten Lifestyle Strategies for Promoting a Healthy Heart

February is American Heart Month—a reminder to all that heart disease continues to be the leading cause of death in the United States. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated in 2008 that 770,000 Americans would suffer a heart attack for the first time, and about 430,000 would have a recurrent attack. The truth of the matter is that, about every 26 seconds, someone living in the United States will suffer a heart attack, and every minute one person will die from one.

Although we can't change some risk factors, such as age and heredity, many factors—including cholesterol, blood pressure, obesity, and inactivity—can be modified, thus significantly lowering the risk of heart disease. And because lifestyle habits (e.g. diet, exercise, and appropriate supplementation) can strongly influence these modifiable risk factors, here are 10 lifestyle strategies you can implement to promote a healthy heart.

1. Make more healthful food choices.

One of the best weapons for fighting off heart disease is eating a healthful diet, particularly one rich in whole grains, legumes, fish, nonfat or low-fat dairy products, and plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Start making healthier food choices by choosing lean meats and poultry without the skin, and be sure to prepare them without added saturated and trans fats; selecting fat-free, 1% fat, or low-fat dairy products; limiting your consumption of foods containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oils to also lower the trans fats in your diet; watching your "added sugar and salt" intake; and remembering that if you drink alcohol, to do so in moderation. That means no more than one drink a day if you're a woman, and two drinks a day if you're a man.

2. Lose the belly fat and keep it off.

Having a wide girth, a beer belly, or an apple-shaped figure may mean you have large amounts of deep-hidden belly fat around your internal organs. This fat, also known as visceral fat, may in fact be the most dangerous fat you can have. It has been linked to high cholesterol, high insulin, high triglycerides, high blood pressure, and other health problems. The more belly fat you have, the higher your risk for developing heart disease or for having a stroke, but also for developing type-2 diabetes and some types of cancer. What makes belly fat so dangerous? Well, it seems to be the type of fat that goes straight to the liver to be metabolized into cholesterol. LDL cholesterol circulates in the blood and contributes to the development of arterial plaque and narrowing of the arteries. Visceral fat also produces more inflammation in the body than fat found in other areas of the body. And inflammation is thought to play a key role in heart disease and a host of other chronic diseases. Studies have also shown that belly-fat cells produce more fibrinogen and plasminogen, two chemicals in the body that promote blood clotting. And last but not least, visceral fat also produces more angiotensin, a hormone that causes blood vessels to constrict. Here again lies the connection between too much belly fat and an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure.

Lose the belly fat and keep it off by following a sensible weight-management program designed to preserve muscle mass while promoting fat loss, especially around the waist. Losing just 5%–10% of your body weight can also significantly improve your blood cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood-sugar levels.

3. Get more of the “sunshine” vitamin.

Vitamin D, also known as the “sunshine vitamin,” is made in the body when the rays of the sun are absorbed by the skin. Health care professionals and nutrition research scientists have known for years this vitamin is needed for the regulation of calcium and phosphorus to help build and maintain strong bones. But recent research indicates vitamin D may do much more than that. Adequate intake of vitamin D may reduce the risk of heart disease.

So what’s the connection between vitamin D and heart health? Well, for one, studies indicate that vitamin D deficiency is associated with increased cardiovascular risk, above and beyond established cardiovascular risk factors such as blood cholesterol and blood pressure. In a study of 1,739 Framingham Heart Study subjects, researchers found that those with blood levels of vitamin D below 15 ng/mL had twice the risk of suffering a cardiovascular event such as a heart attack, heart failure, or stroke in the next five years compared with those who showed higher levels of vitamin D. When researchers adjusted for traditional cardiovascular risk factors such as high cholesterol, diabetes, and high blood pressure, the risk remained significant with a 62% greater risk of a cardiovascular event in participants with low levels of vitamin D compared with those with higher levels.

The current daily recommended dietary intake of vitamin D is 200 IU for everyone up to age 50, then 400 IU up to age 70, and 600 IU for those 70 and older. However, according to nutrition researchers, that may not be enough. Although how much is enough is still being debated, we may need three to four times more than what most people currently get. Especially if you get very little sun exposure, use sunscreen when you are exposed to the sun, are elderly, or have a dark skin complexion. While 10–15 minutes a day of sun exposure can boost vitamin D levels in the body, very few foods in nature contain vitamin D. Fish (such as salmon, tuna, and mackerel) and cod liver oil are among the best sources. Small amounts of vitamin D also are found in beef liver, cheese, and egg yolks, but these foods also are high in fat and cholesterol. Fortified foods provide most of the vitamin D in the American diet. For example, almost all of the U.S. milk supply is fortified with 100 IU per cup. To play it safe, take a multivitamin/multimineral supplement with plenty of vitamin D. Look for a comprehensive formula with at least 400 IU–1,000 IU of vitamin D per serving.

4. Go fishing with omega-3 fatty acids.

To reduce the risk of heart disease, the American Heart Association recommends eating two servings of fish rich in omega-3 fatty acids each week. Why? Because clinical evidence suggests that the omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA found in fish oil help to reduce risk factors for heart disease, including high levels of triglycerides and high blood pressure. There is also strong evidence to suggest these substances inhibit the development of plaque and blood clots, which both contribute to an increased risk of heart attack or stroke. Higher intakes of EPA and DHA may also be helpful in people with existing heart disease. Clinical studies of heart attack survivors have found that daily omega-3 fatty acid supplements dramatically reduce the risk of death, subsequent heart attacks, and stroke. So, are you consuming your two servings of fish, rich in omega-3s each week? Well, if you’re like most Americans, you’re lucky if you consume two servings a month. Moreover, concerns about heavy metal contamination and environmental pollutants in our fish supply pose additional concerns about getting sufficient EPA and DHA supply from diet alone. Take a highly-quality, ultra-pure fish oil supplement daily to ensure you’re getting enough. Look for a supplement that provides a daily serving of 1 gram of omega-3 fatty acids high in EPA and DHA.

5. Protect your body against free radicals and oxidative stress.

Atherosclerosis is a chronic, progressive disease in which plaques (consisting of deposits of cholesterol and other lipids, calcium, and large inflammatory cells called macrophages) build up

in the walls of arteries. Over time, these plaques can lead to a complete obstruction to blood flow or suddenly rupture, causing a blood clot to form and leading to a total blockage of the artery. The development of atherosclerosis is complicated, but the primary event seems to be repeated, subtle injury to the artery's wall through various mechanisms. These mechanisms include physical (e.g. chronic high blood pressure) and inflammatory stresses involving the immune system, certain infections, or chemical abnormalities in the bloodstream (e.g. high cholesterol or diabetes). However, some researchers believe that oxidative stress and free-radical damage to the walls of blood vessels is the initial insult that causes this disease. Many nutrients such as vitamins C and E, and the mineral selenium, are potent antioxidants that work to prevent the oxidation of LDL cholesterol and scavenge free radicals, so getting adequate amounts of these nutrients is another important strategy for promoting cardiovascular health. Consuming more foods rich in these nutrients, such as citrus fruits, strawberries, and potatoes for vitamin C, and nuts and seeds for vitamin E and selenium is a good place to start. And to be sure you're getting enough on a daily basis, don't forget to take a comprehensive multivitamin/multimineral supplement that includes these important antioxidant nutrients.

6. Boost your phytonutrient intake.

Eat your fruits and vegetables, they're good for you! Population studies from around the world suggest that diets rich in fruits and vegetables protect against heart disease, cancer, and other chronic diseases. The goodness of these foods comes not only from the essential nutrients they contain but also from the array of phytonutrients they provide. These phytonutrients impart the tastes, aromas, and colors of food and have profound physiological effects in the body—acting as antioxidants, antiinflammatory agents, mimicking hormones, and suppressing the development of disease. Scientific research has revealed that phytonutrients called flavonoids (resveratrol, catechins, and ellagic acid) may act as potent antioxidants, inhibit inflammation, and help to slow down cellular aging. Another class of phytonutrients—the carotenoids lutein, lycopene, and beta carotene—also exert potent antioxidant activity possibly helping to reduce the risk of heart disease and other conditions such as age-related eye disease and cancer.

7. Fill up on fiber.

Another reason a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is associated with a decreased risk of disease is that these foods are also a great source of dietary fiber. There are two types of fiber in foods and we need both. Insoluble fiber found in the outer layer of grains such as wheat bran promote a healthy digestive system and colon health. Heart health benefits come from soluble fiber, the type of fiber found in oats and apples. Increasing soluble fiber intake helps lower blood cholesterol and blood-sugar levels. So strive to get your five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables each day.

8. Find a friend in Coenzyme Q10.

Coenzyme Q10 (CoQ10) is a fat-soluble, vitamin-like substance found in every human cell. It's involved in key biochemical reactions that produce energy in cells. It also acts as an antioxidant, working with vitamins E and C to protect cells against oxidative stress and free-radical damage. Although the body is capable of making its own CoQ10, production slows as we age. Cholesterol-lowering medications (e.g. statins) also block the body's ability to make CoQ10, and supplementation has been shown in clinical studies to improve cardiac function in people with existing heart conditions such as congestive heart failure. So make sure you're getting enough CoQ10. Although it can be found in foods such as fatty fish, liver, and whole grains, it makes good sense to take CoQ10 supplement daily, especially if you're at risk for heart disease or take cholesterol-lowering medication.

9. Get moving.

Physical inactivity is a risk factor for developing heart disease, and research studies indicate that more than 60% of adults do not engage in the recommended amount of regular physical activity. In fact, 25% of all adults are not active at all. If you're one of them, it's time to get moving. Regular physical activity promotes a healthy heart in so many ways—it helps lower blood pressure and cholesterol, helps control weight, reduces anxiety, and improves blood circulation. Do your heart a favor and try to get 30 minutes of physical activity most days of the week. And remember, if you haven't been active for some time or have a chronic health problem, such as existing heart disease, diabetes, or obesity, consult your physician before beginning a new exercise program.

10. Take time to De-stress.

There's no denying we live in a stressful world, and most of us experience stress on a daily basis. Whether it is physical or emotional stress, your body reacts in the same way: it sets off its "fight or flight" response. As a result, stress hormones are released, increasing blood pressure, heart rate, and blood glucose in attempt to provide our body with an increased energy supply. Over time, this chronic stress response wreaks havoc—slowing digestion, weakening immune function and increasing the risk of heart disease and other chronic conditions. So take time to de-stress your life. Start by getting more sleep and ending those unhealthy habits such as smoking, drinking too much, and overeating. Think about what you truly must get done, set priorities, and learn to say "no." And finally, don't forget to exercise (a great stress reducer) and incorporate relaxation and deep-breathing techniques into your daily routine. Your heart will love you for it.

Be well.



Dr. Jamie McManus MD, FAAFP

Chairman, Medical Affairs, Health Sciences and Education