

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Heart Smarts: Quick Tips to Stay Heart Healthy

The jury is in and the statistics are certainly a cause for concern: Heart disease kills thousands of Americans every year and is the leading cause of death for both men and women. The good news is your risk for developing heart disease can be, in many cases, greatly reduced by keeping your pulse on some simple preventative steps, and practicing heart smarts.

Get off the couch. It's no secret that exercise prevents heart disease, but for many it's still not a priority. It doesn't matter if you're biking, walking, running or swimming; find something you enjoy and do it, but be sure to consult your health professional or physician before starting a new program. Just 30 to 60 minutes a day can lower your chances of heart disease and help you feel and look your best. Even small changes, like taking the stairs at work instead of the elevator, or opting for a walk instead of grabbing that taxi can, over time, add up to make a difference.

Butt out! Cigarette smoking is the leading cause of preventable disease and death in the United States; 480,000 Americans die prematurely each year because of smoking according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Quitting smoking is a challenge, but it can be a lot easier when you have a plan for quitting and the support to put that plan into action. The good news is that as soon as you quit smoking, your risk of heart disease drops.

Fill up on fiber. Consuming foods high in fiber helps with digestion, maintaining a healthy body weight and lowering your risk for cardiovascular disease. Stock up on fibrous foods, such as legumes, vegetables, fruit and whole grain products.

Go local. People who eat local produce have been found to have healthier eating behaviors. Not only are you supporting the local economy, but you also get more flavorful tastes from fruits and vegetables grown nearby, and as a bonus they often contain more nutrients than ones that have taken a long journey in the back of a truck. Colorful, home-grown foods provide flavor, variety and nutrients to your meals. They're also rich in fiber, vitamin C and beta-carotene, as well as antioxidants—all of which can help reduce the buildup of plaque in your arteries and prevent heart disease.

Watch your waistline. You don't need professional equipment if you want to get an idea of whether or not you're at risk of atherosclerosis—the hardening of arteries that increases your chances of getting heart disease. Instead, it can be as simple as getting out the measuring tape and scale. Men and women who are overweight—and in particular those who tend to carry weight in their midsection, and have a waistline of more than 35 inches for women or more than 40 inches for men—are much more likely to suffer from a heart attack or heart disease than those who maintain a healthy body mass index (BMI).

Try to get into the routine of attending annual physical examinations with your doctor, it'll help monitor your overall health so that changes can be assessed and treated proactively. You can also work with your health professional to find out what your healthy weight is, and then develop a plan to stay on a heart healthy track. Remember to set realistic goals and to stay positive—even a modest five to 10 percent off of your body weight can cut your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Step out of the stress lane. Stress can put the body into "emergency mode," raising blood cholesterol and blood pressure, and ultimately taking its toll on your heart. Put daily stressors like traffic, line-ups and deadlines into perspective and take a few deep breaths. Better still, burn anxious energy, boost mood-lifting endorphins and get your heart positively pumping with a dose of daily physical activity. If
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you’re having trouble finding inner calm or are bogged down with bigger issues maybe it’s time to seek advice from a health professional so that you can access insight and expertise to help you cope.

Spot the signs of trouble. Don’t wait until it’s too late to learn the warning signs of heart disease. Most people are aware of the more “typical” symptoms such as shortness of breath, pain or pressure in the chest or upper body (neck, jaw, arms, shoulder). What you may not know are the subtler signs of heart problems or a heart attack. Less clear-cut symptoms—often more commonly reported among women—include indigestion, nausea, back or jaw pain, lightheadedness or cold, clammy skin. If you experience these symptoms, call 9-1-1 or see a doctor immediately.

Knowing the warning signs of heart disease is important and can help reduce your risk of developing more serious heart problems. Getting serious about heart health through preventative steps, such as exercising, quitting smoking, eating well, maintaining a healthy weight and reducing stress can lower your chances of experiencing them firsthand. Remember: Small changes not only add up to reduce the likelihood of developing heart disease, but can also bring balance to your life and improve your overall physical and emotional health.