

Chapter 58

Preventing Heart Disease at Any Age

You're never too young—or too old—to take care of your heart.

Preventing heart disease (and all cardiovascular diseases) means making smart choices now that will pay off the rest of your life.

Lack of exercise, a poor diet, and other bad habits can take their toll over the years. Anyone at any age can benefit from simple steps to keep their heart healthy during each decade of life. Here's how.

What You Can Do to Prevent Heart Disease

All Age Groups

No matter what your age, everyone can benefit from a healthy diet and adequate physical activity.

Choose a healthy eating plan. The food you eat can decrease your risk of heart disease and stroke. Choose foods low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, and added sugars and sweeteners. As part of a healthy diet, eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, fiber-rich whole grains, fish (preferably oily fish—at least twice per week), nuts, legumes, and seeds. Also try eating some meals without meat. Select fat-free and low-fat dairy products and lean meats and poultry (skinless). Limit sugar-sweetened beverages.

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Be physically active. You can slowly work up to at least two and a half hours (150 minutes) of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity (like brisk walking) every week or an hour and fifteen minutes (75 minutes) of vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity (such as jogging or running) or a combination of both every week. Additionally, on two or more days a week you need muscle-strengthening activities that work all major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms).

In Your Twenties

Getting smart about your heart early on puts you far ahead of the curve. The things you do—and don't—are a tell-tale sign of how long and how well you're going to live, said Richard Stein, M.D. "There's no one I know who said: 'I felt better being sedentary. I felt better eating a terrible diet,'" said Stein, a cardiologist and professor of medicine at New York University School of Medicine. "All these things actually make you feel better while they help you."

Find a doctor and have regular wellness exams. Healthy people need doctors, too. Establishing a relationship with a physician means you can start heart-health screenings now. Talk to your doctor about your diet, lifestyle, and checking your blood pressure, cholesterol, heart rate, body mass index, and waist circumference. You may also need your blood sugar checked if you are pregnant, overweight, or have diabetes. Knowing where your numbers stand early makes it easier to spot a possible change in the future.

Be physically active. It's a lot easier to be active and stay active if you start at a young age. "If you're accustomed to physical activity, you'll sustain it," Dr. Stein said. Keep your workout routine interesting by mixing it up and finding new motivators.

Don't smoke and avoid secondhand smoke. If you picked up smoking as a teen, it's time to quit smoking. Even exposure to secondhand smoke poses a serious health hazard. Nonsmokers are up to 30 percent more likely to develop heart disease or lung cancer from secondhand smoke exposure at home or work, according to a U.S. Surgeon General report.

In Your Thirties

Juggling family and career leaves many adults with little time to worry about their hearts. Here are some ways to balance all three.

Make heart-healthy living a family affair. Create and sustain heart-healthy habits in your kids and you'll reap the benefits, too.

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Spend less time on the couch and more time on the move. Explore a nearby park on foot or bike. Shoot some hoops or walk the dog. Plant a vegetable and fruit garden together in the yard, and invite your kids into the kitchen to help cook.

Know your family history. Shake your family tree to learn about heart health. Having a relative with heart disease increases your risk, especially if the relative is a parent or sibling. That means you need to focus on risk factors you can control by maintaining a healthy weight, exercising regularly, not smoking, and eating right. Also, keep your doctor informed about any heart problems you learn about in your family.

Tame your stress. Long-term stress causes an increase in heart rate and blood pressure that may damage the artery walls. Learning stress management techniques benefits your body and your quality of life. Try deep-breathing exercises and find time each day to do something you enjoy. Giving back through volunteering also does wonders for knocking out stress.

In Your Forties

If heart health hasn't been a priority, don't worry. Healthy choices you make now can strengthen your heart for the long haul. Understand why you need to make lifestyle changes and have the confidence to make them. Then, tackle them one at a time. "Each success makes you more confident to take on the next one," said Dr. Stein, who is also an American Heart Association volunteer.

Watch your weight. In your forties, your metabolism starts slowing down. But you can avoid weight gain by following a heart-healthy diet and getting plenty of exercise. The trick is to find a workout routine you enjoy. If you need motivation to get moving, find a workout buddy or join American Heart Association Walking Paths and Walking Clubs.

Have your blood sugar level checked. In addition to blood pressure checks and other heart-health screenings, you should have a fasting blood glucose test by the time you're forty-five. This first test serves as a baseline for future tests, which you should have every three years. Testing may be done earlier or more often if you are overweight, diabetic, or at risk for becoming diabetic.

Don't brush off snoring. Listen to your sleeping partner's complaints about your snoring. One in five adults has at least mild sleep apnea, a condition that causes pauses in breathing during sleep. If not properly treated, sleep apnea can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke.

In Your Fifties

Unlike the emergence of wrinkles and gray hair, what you can't see as you get older is the impact aging has on your heart. So starting in the fifties, you need to take extra steps.

Eat a healthy diet. It's easy to slip into some unhealthy eating habits, so refresh your eating habits eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, fiber-rich whole grains, fish (preferably oily fish—at least twice per week), nuts, legumes, and seeds and try eating some meals without meat.

Learn the warning signs of a heart attack and stroke. Now is the time to get savvy about symptoms. Not everyone experiences sudden numbness with a stroke or severe chest pain with a heart attack. And heart attack symptoms in women can be different than men.

Follow your treatment plan. By now, you may have been diagnosed with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, or other conditions that increase your risk for heart disease or stroke. Lower your risk by following your prescribed treatment plan, including medications and lifestyle and diet changes.

In Your Sixties-Plus

With age comes an increased risk for heart disease. Your blood pressure, cholesterol, and other heart-related numbers tend to rise. Watching your numbers closely and managing any health problems that arise—along with the requisite healthy eating and exercise—can help you live longer and better.

Have an ankle-brachial index test. Starting in your sixties, an ankle-brachial index test should be done every one to two years as part of a physical exam. The test assesses the pulses in the feet to help diagnose peripheral artery disease (PAD), a lesser-known cardiovascular disease in which plaque builds up in the leg arteries.

Watch your weight. Your body burns fewer calories as you get older. Excess weight causes your heart to work harder and increases the risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol. Exercising regularly and eating smaller portions of nutrient-rich foods may help you maintain a healthy weight.

Learn the warning signs of a heart attack and stroke. Heart attack symptoms in women can be different than in men. Knowing when you're having a heart attack or stroke means you're more likely to get immediate help. Quick treatment can save your life and prevent serious disability.

Chapter 62

Heart-Healthy Eating

Why do I need to be concerned about heart healthy eating?

What you eat affects your risk for having heart disease and poor blood circulation, which can lead to a heart attack or stroke. Heart disease is the number one killer and stroke is the number three killer of American women and men.

In the main type of heart disease, a fatty substance called plaque builds up in the arteries that bring oxygen-rich blood to the heart. Over time, this buildup causes the arteries to narrow and harden. When this happens, the heart does not get all the blood it needs to work properly. The result can be chest pain or a heart attack.

Most cases of stroke occur when a blood vessel bringing blood to the brain becomes blocked. The underlying condition for this type of blockage is having fatty deposits lining the vessel walls.

What foods should I eat to help prevent heart disease and stroke?

You should eat mainly the following things:

- Fruits and vegetables

“Heart Healthy Eating Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women’s Health, January 1, 2008. Reviewed by David A. Cooke, M.D., FACP, October 2013.

- Grains (at least half of your grains should be whole grains, such as whole wheat, whole oats, oatmeal, whole-grain corn, brown rice, wild rice, whole rye, whole-grain barley, buckwheat, bulgur, millet, quinoa, and sorghum)
- Fat-free or low-fat versions of milk, cheese, yogurt, and other milk products
- Fish, skinless poultry, lean meats, dry beans, eggs, and nuts
- Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats (found in fish, nuts, and vegetable oils)

Also, you should limit the amount of foods you eat that contain the following things:

- Saturated fat (found in foods such as fatty cuts of meat, whole milk, cheese made from whole milk, ice cream, sherbet, frozen yogurt, butter, lard, cakes, cookies, doughnuts, sausage, regular mayonnaise, coconut, palm oil)
- Trans fat (found mainly in processed foods such as cakes, cookies, crackers, pies, stick or hard margarine, potato chips, corn chips)
- Cholesterol (found in foods such as liver, chicken and turkey giblets, pork, sausage, whole milk, cheese made from whole milk, ice cream, sherbet, frozen yogurt)
- Sodium (found in salt and baking soda)
- Added sugars (such as corn syrup, corn sweetener, fructose, glucose, sucrose, dextrose, lactose, maltose, honey, molasses, raw sugar, invert sugar, malt syrup, syrup, caramel, and fruit juice concentrates)

Eating lots of saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol may cause plaque buildup in your arteries. Eating lots of sodium may cause you to develop high blood pressure, also called hypertension. Eating lots of added sugars may cause you to develop type 2 diabetes. Both hypertension and diabetes increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.

How can I tell how much saturated fat, trans fat, and other substances are in the foods I eat?

Prepared foods that come in packages—such as breads, cereals, canned and frozen foods, snacks, desserts, and drinks—have a Nutrition Facts label on the package. The label states how many calories and how much saturated fat, trans fat, and other substances are in each serving.

For food that does not have a Nutrition Facts label, such as fresh salmon or a raw apple, you can use the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Nutrient Database. This is a bit harder than using the Nutrition Facts label, but by comparing different foods you can get an idea if a food is high or low in saturated fat, sodium, and other substances.

What is a calorie?

When talking about a calorie in food, it is a measure of the energy that the food supplies to your body. When talking about burning calories during physical activity, a calorie is a measure of the energy used by your body. To maintain the same body weight, the number of food calories you eat during the day should be about the same as the number of calories your body uses.

The number of calories you should eat each day depends on your age, sex, body size, how physically active you are, and other conditions. For instance, a woman between the ages of thirty-one and fifty who is of normal weight and moderately active should eat about two thousand calories each day.

Are there eating plans that can help me choose foods that are good for my heart?

There are four eating plans that can help you choose heart healthy foods:

- MyPyramid eating plan
- Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan
- Heart Healthy Diet
- Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes (TLC) Diet

The MyPyramid eating plan is based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. It was developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to help people lower their risk of serious diseases linked to diet, including heart disease. DASH was developed by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) to help people with hypertension lower their blood pressure but it can also be used to help prevent heart disease. The Heart Healthy Diet was developed by NHLBI to help people keep their blood levels of total cholesterol and low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, or “bad” cholesterol, low. The TLC diet was developed by NHLBI to help people with unhealthy blood cholesterol levels.

These eating plans have interactive websites to help you choose foods that meet their guidelines. You type in your age, sex, height, weight, and activity level. Based on this information the websites give you tips on what types of foods to eat and how much of each type.

How do these eating plans work?

The four eating plans are similar. They are all designed to help you eat foods that are good for your heart and avoid foods that are bad for your heart. Table 62.1 compares the main guidelines of the four eating plans.

Notice that all four eating plans limit the amount of sodium you should eat each day to about one teaspoon of salt (two-thirds of a teaspoon for people with hypertension or at risk for hypertension). Most of the salt we eat each day actually comes from processed foods rather than salt that we add to foods that we cook. Make sure to check the sodium content on the Nutrition Facts label when buying food. The sodium content in similar foods can vary a lot. For instance, the sodium content in regular tomato soup may be 700 mg per cup in one brand and 1,100 mg per cup in another brand. Choosing the brands with lower sodium content can be one way to lower the amount of sodium you eat.

Table 62.1. Heart-Healthy Eating Plans: How They Compare

	<i>% of the day's total calories from saturated fat</i>	<i>% of the day's total calories from fat</i>	<i>amount of trans fat</i>	<i>milligrams (mg) of dietary cholesterol per day</i>	<i>milligrams (mg) of dietary sodium per day</i>
MyPyramid	less than 10%	20–35%	as low as possible	less than 300 mg	less than 2,300 mg ^a
DASH ^b	5%	22%	as low as possible	136 mg	less than 2,300 mg ^a
Heart Healthy Diet	8–10%	30% or less	as low as possible	less than 300 mg	less than 2,400 mg
TLC Diet	less than 7%	25–35% or less	as low as possible	less than 200 mg	less than 2,400 mg

Notes: ^a2,300 milligrams of sodium in table salt is about 1 teaspoon of salt. People with hypertension should eat no more than 1,500 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day (about two-thirds of a teaspoon of salt). African Americans and middle-aged and older adults should also eat no more than 1,500 mg of sodium per day. The reason is that these groups have a high risk of developing hypertension.

^bThese DASH guidelines are for someone eating 2,000 calories each day.

Another way to limit sodium is to use spices other than salt. There are plenty of salt-free spice combinations that you can find in your grocery store. It may take a while for you to get used to the taste. But give it time. After a while, you may like them better than salt.

Besides limiting the amount of sodium you eat, it is also a good idea to eat foods rich in potassium. A potassium-rich diet blunts the harmful effects of sodium on blood pressure. Aim to eat 4,700 mg of potassium a day. Foods rich in potassium include fruits and vegetables, especially the following:

- Tomatoes and tomato products
- Orange juice and grapefruit juice
- Raisins, dates, prunes
- White potatoes and sweet potatoes
- Lettuce
- Papayas

I've heard that eating fish is good for my heart. Why is that?

Fish and shellfish contain a type of fat called omega-3 fatty acids. Research suggests that eating omega-3 fatty acids lowers your chances of dying from heart disease. Fish that naturally contain more oil (such as salmon, trout, herring, mackerel, anchovies, and sardines) have more omega-3 fatty acids than lean fish (such as cod, haddock, and catfish). Be careful, though, about eating too much shellfish. Shrimp is a type of shellfish that has a lot of cholesterol.

You can also get omega-3 fatty acids from plant sources, such as the following:

- Canola oil
- Soybean oil
- Walnuts
- Ground flaxseed (linseed) and flaxseed oil

Is drinking alcohol bad for my heart?

Drinking too much alcohol can, over time, damage your heart and raise your blood pressure. If you drink alcohol, you should do so moderately. For women, moderate drinking means one drink per day. For men, it means two drinks per day. One drink counts as the following:

- 5 ounces of wine
- 12 ounces of beer

- 1½ ounces of 80-proof hard liquor

Research suggests that moderate drinkers are less likely to develop heart disease than people who don't drink any alcohol or who drink too much. Red wine drinkers in particular seem to be protected to some degree against heart disease. Red wine contains flavonoids, which are thought to prevent plaque buildup. Flavonoids also are found in the following foods:

- Red grapes
- Apples
- Berries
- Broccoli

On the other hand, drinking more than one drink per day increases the risks of certain cancers, including breast cancer. And if you are pregnant, could become pregnant, or have another health condition that could make alcohol use harmful, you should not drink.

With the help of your doctor, decide whether moderate drinking to lower heart attack risk outweighs the possible increased risk of breast cancer or other medical problems.

***I need help working out an eating plan that's right for me.
Who can I ask for help?***

You may want to talk with a registered dietitian. A dietitian is a nutrition expert who can give you advice about what foods to eat and how much of each type. Ask your doctor to recommend a dietitian. You also can contact the American Dietetic Association.

Besides eating healthy foods, what else can I do to keep my heart healthy?

To reduce your risk of heart disease do the following things:

- Quit smoking. Talk with your doctor or nurse if you need help quitting.
- Get at least two hours and thirty minutes of moderate aerobic physical activity each week.
- Lose weight if you are overweight, and keep a healthy weight.
- Get your blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels checked regularly.