



HEART HEALTH MONTH

Why do we observe Heart Health Month every February? Well, every year more than 600,000 Americans die from heart disease. The number one cause of deaths for most groups, heart disease affects all ages, gender, and ethnicities. Risk factors include high cholesterol, high blood pressure, smoking, diabetes, and excessive alcohol use.

Do you know how to keep your heart healthy? You can take an active role in reducing your risk for heart disease by eating a healthy diet, engaging in physical activity and managing your cholesterol and blood pressure. This is a great chance to start some heart-healthy habits

HISTORY OF AMERICAN HEART MONTH

The human heart is responsible for pumping blood throughout our body, supplying oxygen and nutrients and removing toxins and waste. Weighing between 8 and 12 ounces, the heart is a mighty organ divided into four chambers that work together to pump blood in and out. The heart gets oxygenated blood from the lungs and pumps it throughout the rest of the body. It does this by contracting at a rhythmic pace, about 60-80 times per minute, thanks to electrical cells called "pacemakers." When the heart ceases to perform its regular function, a medical device also called a pacemaker can be implanted to assist the heart.

Heart disease occurs when the arteries leading to the heart become clogged. Although heart disease has been around for thousands of years, we do know that many aspects of modern life exacerbate risk factors and make people more prone to

heart disease and heart failure. Today, one in four deaths in the U.S. is attributable to heart disease. Heart disease can affect everyone, but taking stock of your prior health risks, activities and diet can help you reduce your risk.

Although we've learned a lot about how the heart works, there are still many unanswered questions about heart health and the cardiovascular system. As far as we know, the best way to protect your heart is to stay active, eat a healthy and balanced diet, and reduce your daily stress. To celebrate American Heart Month, take some time to learn about heart health risks, find your favorite heart-healthy activities, and cook some healthy meals with your family.

WHAT IS HEART DISEASE?

The phrases "heart disease" and "cardiovascular disease" are used interchangeably to describe the various conditions that affect your heart. Heart or cardiovascular diseases include blood vessel diseases, heart rhythm problems, and congenital heart defects.

The most common form of heart disease in the United States is coronary artery disease (CAD), which occurs when the arteries that supply blood to the heart become hardened and narrowed due to a buildup of cholesterol, known as plaque. CAD can lead to health issues such as heart attack, heart failure, angina (chest pain), stroke, and irregular heartbeat.

FACTS ABOUT HEART DISEASE

Every year, one in four people will die from heart disease. Heart disease can strike anyone, but certain individuals may be more at risk than others. Some of the most common risk factors for heart disease include:

- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Diabetes
- Obesity
- Poor diet
- Inactive lifestyle
- Cigarette smoking
- Excessive alcohol consumption

Heart disease is still the main source of death in the United States. In fact, cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death in the world. And according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), many of these deaths would have been preventable with proper preventative care.

KNOWING THE SYMPTOMS OF HEART DISEASE

While there are several different forms of heart disease, they share common symptoms and warning signs. It's important to learn these symptoms to receive a prompt diagnosis and medical treatment. Symptoms of an emergency may include:

- Chest pain, discomfort or an uncomfortable pressure in the chest
- Shortness of breath
- Pain in the upper body, arms, back, neck, jaw or upper stomach
- Feeling nauseous or vomiting
- Sweating; or cold sweats
- Weakness, light-headedness, feeling faint or dizzy
- Feeling very full or having indigestion
- Fatigue or exhaustion
- An irregular heartbeat, palpitations, or increased heart rate

PREVENT HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

By living a healthy lifestyle, you can help keep your blood pressure in a healthy range. Preventing high blood pressure, which is also called hypertension, can lower your risk for heart disease and stroke. Practice the following healthy living habits:

EAT A HEALTHY DIET

Choose healthy meal and snack options to help you avoid high blood pressure and its complications. Be sure to eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Talk with your health care team about eating a variety of foods rich in potassium, fiber, and protein and lower in [salt](#) (sodium) and saturated fat. For many people, making these healthy changes can help keep blood pressure low and protect against heart disease and stroke.

The DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) eating plan is a healthy diet plan with a proven record of helping people lower their blood pressure.

KEEP YOURSELF AT A HEALTHY WEIGHT

Having overweight or obesity increases your risk for high blood pressure. To determine whether your weight is in a healthy range, doctors often calculate your body mass index (BMI). If you know your weight and height, you can calculate your BMI at CDC's [Assessing Your Weight](#) website. Doctors sometimes also use waist and hip measurements to assess body fat.

Talk with your health care team about ways to reach a healthy weight, including choosing healthy foods and getting regular physical activity.

BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

Did you know that exercising as little as 30 minutes every day can improve your heart health and quality of life? It can even be simple activities that are easier to incorporate into your schedule, like taking your dog for a jog, tossing a ball with your kids or sunset walk in the neighborhood. According to the American Heart Association, walking is the simplest positive change you can make to improve your heart health. Here's why:

- Studies have shown that for every hour of walking, you may increase your life expectancy by two hours.
- Regular walking can improve your cholesterol, lower blood pressure, increase your energy and stamina and prevent weight gain.
- Walking is low-risk, easy to begin and can be done anywhere, anytime.
- You can adapt walking to your mood – go it alone, take your pup or walk with someone from your household who you've been "quarantining" with.

Schedule too crazy? Try breaking up your 30 minutes into three, 10-minute walk breaks throughout your day. These can be done before work, during lunch or after dinner – whatever works for you and is easy to maintain.

So, let's get up and start moving today! Your heart will thank you.

DASH EATING PLAN

Getting Started on DASH

HEALTHY EATING, PROVEN RESULTS

It's easy to adopt the DASH eating plan. Even small changes made gradually lead to significant benefits. Follow these steps to begin a healthy lifestyle for a lifetime.

1 Assess where you are now.

The DASH eating plan requires no special foods and has no hard-to-follow recipes. One way to begin is by using the free, interactive, online [Body Weight Planner \(niddk.nih.gov/bwp\)](http://BodyWeightPlanner.niddk.nih.gov/bwp) to find out how many calories you need per day to maintain or reach your goal weight. Then fill in the What's on Your Plate? worksheet for a few days and see how your current food habits compare with the DASH plan. This will help you see what changes you need to make.

2 Discuss medication with your doctor.

If you take medication to control high blood pressure or cholesterol, you should not stop using it. Follow the DASH eating plan and talk with your doctor about your medication treatment as part of an overall plan for wellness.

3 Make DASH a part of your healthy life.

The DASH eating plan along with other lifestyle changes can help you control your blood pressure and lower blood cholesterol. Important lifestyle recommendations include: achieve and maintain a healthy weight, get regular physical activity, and, if you drink alcohol, do so in moderation (up to one drink per day for women and up to two drinks per day for men).

4 DASH is for everyone in the family.

Start with the meal plans in [A Week With the DASH Eating Plan](#) if you want to follow the menus similar to those used in the DASH trial—then make up your own using your favorite foods. In fact, your entire family can eat meals using the DASH eating plan because it can be adapted to meet varied nutritional needs, food preferences, and dietary requirements.

5 Don't worry.

Remember that on some days the foods you eat may add up to more than the recommended servings from one food group and less from another. Or, you may have too much sodium on a particular day. Just try your best to keep the average of several days close to the DASH eating plan and the sodium level recommended for you.

kale

kidney beans

blackberries

potato

salmon

DASH EATING PLAN

The DASH Eating Plan is a heart healthy approach that has been scientifically proven to lower blood pressure and have other health benefits. To learn more, go to www.nhlbi.nih.gov/DASH.



NIH

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

For more information go to:

<https://www.unityhealthcare.com/february-american-heart-month/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/bloodpressure/prevent.htm>

<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/education/dash/following-dash>