

# Heart Health

A healthy heart is central to overall good health. Embracing a healthy lifestyle at any age can prevent [heart disease](#) and lower your risk for a [heart attack](#) or [stroke](#). You are never too old or too young to begin taking care of your heart. Swapping good habits for bad can make a difference, even if you've already suffered a heart attack.

Things that put you at higher risk for heart disease include

- Smoking
- [High blood pressure](#)
- [Obesity](#)/being overweight
- High cholesterol levels
- Inactivity (no exercise)
- Family history of heart disease (especially a parent or sibling)

The good news is that it is possible to decrease your risk, even if you have heart disease.

## Make healthy food choices

Balance is the key to eating healthy long-term.

- Focus on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, and lean proteins. It's okay to treat yourself to less healthy foods occasionally. Just make sure that you aren't treating yourself too often!
- A colorful plate with plenty of red, orange, yellow, and dark-green vegetables will provide the vitamins and minerals you need.
- Cut down on processed foods – the boxed and packaged foods (think crackers, potato chips, fast food) Choose foods low in sodium (salt). Remember, canned foods contain a lot of sodium.
- Drink water instead of soda and energy drinks, which have lots of sugar. Drinking water in place of these can significantly impact your health for the better.

## Watch your weight

The more weight you gain, the higher your body mass index (BMI). Your BMI is a measure of your body fat based on your height and weight. The higher your BMI, the higher your risk for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and high blood sugar levels. Obesity also puts you at risk for breathing problems, gallbladder disease, liver disease, and even cancer. Making healthy food choices in combination with an exercise program is the best way to lose weight. Even a small amount of weight loss can make a big difference in your health. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), losing just 5% to 10% of your body weight can reduce your risk for having a heart attack or stroke.

## Be active

You don't have to be a member of a gym or buy fancy equipment to exercise. The key is just to get up and move. Go for a walk. Take the stairs at work. Do some push-ups or sit-ups. Dance.

Adults should get at least 2 and a half hours of moderate aerobic activity each week plus 2 days of strength training each week, and children should get at least an hour of activity daily. Aerobic exercise has a direct effect on your heart. Your heart is a muscle, and exercise makes it stronger. Exercise can lower your risk for developing plaque in your arteries. Plaque is a waxy substance that can clog arteries and reduce blood flow to your heart. If plaque builds up too much, it can even block the artery. This is what causes a heart attack.

### **Know your numbers**

- Know your blood pressure and cholesterol level. There are often no symptoms associated with high blood pressure. The best way to know for sure is to check.
- Have regular cholesterol screenings. If you have been diagnosed with high blood pressure or high cholesterol, you should also be screened for diabetes.

### **Stop smoking**

No new news here. Smoking is bad for you. It causes cancer. It damages your lungs. It's also terrible for your heart. Smoking increases your risk for heart disease. It damages the lining of your arteries. There are numerous studies that provide evidence that smoking cigarettes is a major cause of coronary heart disease, which leads to heart attacks. If you smoke, there are medicines that can help, and tools such as nicotine gum and patches. Vaping is **not** a tool to help you quit, so don't trade smoking for vaping. Ask your doctor to recommend a resource. Try to steer clear of secondhand smoke as well.

### **Don't take gums for granted**

Periodontal disease (gum disease) is associated with other health issues, including premature birth, arthritis, and diabetes. Some medical professionals believe the bacteria that cause gum disease spread from the mouth through the body. As they spread, they make inflammation worse which can trigger heart disease. Preventing gum disease can help with your overall health. Regular brushing, flossing, and dental checkups are the best way to maintain oral health. If you already have gum disease, schedule regular cleanings with a periodontist (a dentist who specializes in gum disease). There is strong evidence that controlling gum disease can help reduce your risk for heart disease

### **Manage stress**

Stress is often associated with high blood pressure. Chronic stress exposes your body to elevated levels of stress hormones. The way you react to stress can directly impact your health. There are breathing exercises that can help you process stress. Meditation has also proven to be an effective way to manage stress. Exercise is also a great way to deal with it. Poor ways to react to stress are to smoke, to drink alcohol, or to let it interfere with sleep.

Choosing healthier foods and exercising are two of the best ways to contribute to good heart health. The power of prevention is on your side!

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*This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject.*