

Did you
know?

Give your heart some love

The strong beat of your heart

Making eight positive lifestyle changes

Your heart is a muscle, and there are so many things you can do to make that muscle stronger. You may not realize how some bad habits can harm your heart over time—and how some good habits can help your heart perform like a champion. Don't think about starting too late or doing too little. Your heart will be grateful for any improvements you make in being healthier.

Here are eight lifestyle changes that can help give you a strong heart to live and love longer:

1. Stop smoking

The link between smoking and heart disease is well documented. Cigarettes aren't just bad for your lungs, they can put you at much higher risk for developing coronary heart disease than nonsmokers.¹ Yes, it can be difficult to quit smoking but don't give up on giving up cigarettes—it's one of the most important things you can do to keep your heart healthy.

2. Do more cardiovascular exercise

Regular, moderate-to-vigorous aerobic activity helps reduce the risk of heart disease. To lower the risk for heart attack and stroke, the World Health Organization recommends 30 minutes of exercise every day of the week.² Don't have that much time to set aside during the day? No problem. You can do two or three segments of 10 to 15 minutes per day and still get good health benefits.

The heart loves cardiovascular activity, which is any activity that makes the heart and lungs work harder. That covers a lot of fun activities to try, indoors and out: walking, running, biking, swimming, even jumping rope.

3. Maintain a healthy weight

People who have excess body fat — especially around the waist — are more likely to develop heart disease and stroke even if they have no other risk factors. Studies have shown that a weight loss of even 3 to 5% body weight may reduce your risk factors.³ Many people struggle with losing weight, but it's one of the most important things you can do to keep your heart healthy.³

4. Manage your cholesterol

Cholesterol is actually a substance that the body produces naturally. But some people produce too much of it, and others add to their cholesterol with poor choices. Too much cholesterol can "clog up" blood flow to and from the heart with a buildup of plaque on the inner walls of the heart's arteries. This plaque buildup can lead to a condition called atherosclerosis, which causes the arteries to narrow and harden. Fortunately, most people can actively reduce their cholesterol levels through a combination of diet and exercise. It's not just about cutting back on foods that are high in cholesterol, you can also choose high-fiber foods that can help lower your cholesterol.

5. Manage your blood pressure

Blood pressure is the force of the blood pushing against blood vessel walls. Your blood pressure can rise temporarily from stress, or high blood pressure can be a chronic, sustained condition. Either way, you probably won't be able to tell that your blood pressure is elevated unless you check it with a blood pressure monitor. If your blood pressure remains elevated, it increases the heart's workload and contributes to developing atherosclerosis. There are many lifestyle changes you can make that can help lower your blood pressure: losing weight, increasing physical activity (especially cardiovascular activity), and using less salt in your food. However, if your blood pressure doesn't come down and stay down through lifestyle changes, it is extremely important to see your doctor.

6. Reduce stress

You may be surprised to learn that prolonged stress can contribute to heart disease. Excess stress can contribute to high blood pressure. People often manage stress in unhealthy ways, such as overeating and smoking, which can damage the heart over time. You may think that stress is unavoidable. But there are many options for helping to reduce stress throughout the day—taking a walk, meditating, deep breathing and stretching.

7. Manage your diabetes

If you've been diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, studies suggest that you may be at a higher risk for developing cardiovascular disease. Even when glucose levels are under control, diabetes increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. But your risks are even greater if your blood sugar is not well controlled. Whether or not you're on medication for diabetes, lifestyle changes can always contribute to controlling your diabetes. The top lifestyle changes for diabetics are:

- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Following eating recommendations for diabetes
- Getting regular exercise.

Sources:

1. Surgeon General, "The Health Consequences of Smoking—50 Years of Progress: A Report of the Surgeon General," January 2014
2. World Health Organization, "Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health," June 2015
3. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, "Health Risks of Being Overweight," December 2012
4. World Heart Federation, "Cardiovascular disease risk factors - Diabetes," 2015

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