

February is the month of Valentine's Day and it's also a good time to think about heart health. Having a heart healthy lifestyle can help prevent heart disease.¹ Making small changes in eating habits, physical activity, and lifestyle choices can add up to big benefits for heart health.

Aim to eat well-balanced meals that include all food groups. Be mindful of portion sizes and limit snacks. Of particular concern to heart healthy nutrition are sodium and fat. Excess sodium may contribute to high blood pressure and increase the risk of heart disease.² It's easy to identify salty-tasting foods high in sodium such as chips and pretzels, but be aware of hidden sodium in processed foods. Cold cuts, cured meats, pizza, soup, breads and rolls, processed breaded chicken products, burritos, and tacos are all surprisingly high in sodium.³ Look for lower sodium versions of these foods and limit portions.

Dietary fats are also of concern with heart health. The American Heart Association recommends between 20 and 35% of calories should come from fats.⁴ Saturated and trans fats are known to be associated with increased LDL cholesterol and increased risk for heart disease.⁴ Saturated fats are solid at room temperature. Saturated fat is most often from animal products such as beef, lamb, pork, poultry with skin, butter, cream, cheese and other dairy products from whole or 2% milk.⁴ Plant based saturated fats include coconut, coconut oil, palm oil and palm kernel oil, and cocoa butter.⁴ Trans fats are liquid oils processed into shelf stable solid fats.⁴ Look for "partially hydrogenated oil" in foods labels to identify foods containing processed trans fats.⁴ Unsaturated fats are liquid at room temperature and are a heart healthier option.⁴ Keep in mind, the calories in all fats are equal so even healthy fats should be consumed in moderation.

Being physically active may also reduce the risk of heart disease.⁵ Consult your doctor to determine the type and intensity of physical activity you can safely pursue. Moderate physical activity such as walking, gardening, and dancing can contribute to better health and be fun and social as well. The American Heart Association recommends older adults engage in 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five times per week or 20 minutes or vigorous physical activity three times each week.⁵ Check out local park districts and senior centers for exercise classes and walking groups. Find activities you enjoy and invite a friend!

Smoking is a known risk factor for heart disease and quitting smoking has numerous health benefits.⁵ According to the American Lung Association, "As soon as you quit, your body begins to repair the damage caused by smoking."⁶ There are many ways to quit smoking so don't give up until you find the one that works for you. Your doctor may also have some helpful information on ways to quit smoking.

While the physical connection between heart disease and stress is still being studied, learning to better manage everyday stress can improve quality of life.⁷ The American Heart Association offers practical tips on reducing everyday stress. Talking with supportive friends and family about your feelings and concerns, enjoying regular physical activity, getting organized to feel less overwhelmed, and getting enough sleep are some ways to help reduce feeling stressed.⁸

Embrace a heart healthy lifestyle and enjoy the benefits of better wellbeing. Check out more information from the American Heart Association and recruit friends and family to share your healthy adventure.

References

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For more information:

Living a Heart Healthy Life as an Active Senior

American Heart Association.

https://www.heart.org/idc/groups/heart-public/@wcm/@hcm/documents/downloadable/ucm_472505.pdf.