



Getting to the Heart of the Matter: Know Your Risks

Brought to you by Lockton Nurse Advocate

Understanding your personal risk factors for cardiovascular disease can help you make smarter choices to protect your heart.

There are two types of risk factors: non-modifiable and modifiable. Non-modifiable risks are those you cannot change—such as your age, sex, and family history. For example, if you are over the age of 45 and have a close relative with early-onset heart disease, you also have a higher risk of developing heart disease. However, your modifiable risks factors are those you do have control over.

Here are a few tips to help reduce your modifiable risks of heart disease:

- **SMOKING:** Tobacco damages blood vessels, increases blood pressure, and raises your risk for heart attack and stroke. Avoiding tobacco products, including vaping devices, can significantly reduce your risk of heart and lung disease.
- **SLEEP:** Poor sleep (less than six hours per night) has been linked to increased inflammation and weight gain. Prioritizing your sleep by maintaining a regular sleep schedule, creating a calming bedtime routine, and limiting evening screen time can help protect your heart.
- **ALCOHOL:** Heavy alcohol consumption (8 or more drinks for women and 15 or more drinks for men over the course of a week) can be damaging to your heart muscle. Limiting alcohol to moderate levels—no more than one drink per day for women, and two for men, can reduce your health risks.

- **FOOD CHOICES:** Foods that are high in fat and sodium can damage arteries and increase plaque formation. Choosing heart-healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and unsaturated fats (those that are liquid at room temperature) helps to maintain a healthy cardiovascular system.
- **ACTIVITY:** Physical activity boosts high-density lipoprotein (HDL)—the good cholesterol. Aiming to get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity each week, such as brisk walking or cycling, can help your body metabolize fat more effectively.
- **STRESS:** Stress can increase heart-damaging inflammatory hormones like cortisol. Learning to manage stress in healthy ways, through exercise, meditation, journaling, spending time outdoors, or counseling, can help balance your hormones and reduce strain on your heart.

Your heart muscle works hard, beating 60 to 100 times per minute on average. Small, consistent lifestyle changes can significantly lower your risk of heart disease. Focusing on what you can control and fine-tuning your daily habits helps to reduce your risks. You may also consider speaking with your doctor to see if any specific tests might be appropriate based on your personal health history.



The Sleep-Cardio Connection

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Each night while you are sleeping, your body continues working, making necessary repairs to keep you functioning at your best.

However, when your sleep is disrupted or inadequate, your cardiovascular system suffers. During sleep, your heart rate slows down, your blood pressure drops, and your body begins to repair essential systems to restore energy levels. Not getting enough sleep can interfere with this restorative process. Adults who get less than seven hours of sleep each night are at higher risk for heart-related conditions like high blood pressure, obesity, type 2 diabetes, stroke, and heart attack.



Chronic sleep deprivation also contributes to inflammation, which interrupts metabolism and hormone balance. Over time, this can place added strain on your cardiovascular system. It can leave you feeling sluggish during the day, but the damage to your heart could be even more serious. Poor sleep quality, irregular sleep patterns, and sleep disorders like sleep apnea should be addressed as important health issues rather than minor inconveniences.

Inadequate sleep affects your heart in several ways:

- **BLOOD PRESSURE:** Poor sleep can increase blood pressure, especially overnight when it should be naturally lower while you are asleep.
- **STRESS HORMONES:** Inadequate sleep leads to increased circulating stress hormones, including cortisol, which can harm the walls of blood vessels.
- **INSULIN:** Not getting enough sleep can lead to insulin resistance, which elevates your risk of developing prediabetes and type 2 diabetes.
- **WEIGHT:** Disrupted sleep can lead to daytime food cravings and poor dietary choices, which can cause unwanted weight gain.
- **FATIGUE:** Sleep deprivation can also cause fatigue, which can result in poor decision-making and even safety concerns.

Your natural daily rhythms—also called circadian rhythms—help with the regulation of blood pressure, metabolism, body temperature, hormone production, and other important processes. Getting enough high-quality sleep ensures that these rhythms stay in sync. To support your heart, make sleep a priority. Start by creating a consistent bedtime routine, limiting daytime sleep disruptors like caffeine and digital device use before bed, and optimizing your sleep environment by keeping things cool, dark, and quiet. Aim for seven to nine hours of restful sleep each night to improve both your sleep and your heart health.

Beyond the Smoke: How Vaping Affects Your Cardiovascular System

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Many people still think vaping is a safer alternative to traditional cigarettes, but growing evidence shows that it poses similar serious risks to your heart.

Vaping liquids contain nicotine, but they may also contain ultrafine particles, heavy metals, and other toxic substances that can inflame blood vessels and damage the lining of arteries, which increases the risk of heart disease. Vaping can also raise your heart rate, leading to spikes in blood pressure (hypertension), which can increase the risk of blood clots, heart attack, and stroke.

Here are just a few ways that quitting vaping can help your heart:

- **BLOOD PRESSURE:** Nicotine acts as a stimulant for the nervous system, causing a temporary but substantial spike in blood pressure and heart rate. By quitting tobacco, you can reduce the strain on your heart and blood vessels, lowering your risk of hypertension and heart disease.
- **INFLAMMATION AND OXIDATIVE STRESS:** The toxic substances in vape aerosols increase inflammation and oxidative stress, which damage blood vessel walls and accelerate plaque buildup on artery walls. Quitting reduces this inflammation and prevents the development of atherosclerosis.
- **HEART RHYTHM:** Vaping can disrupt electrical signals in your heart, contributing to arrhythmias and irregular heartbeats. These rhythm abnormalities increase the risk for serious medical conditions like stroke and heart attack.



- **REDUCED OXYGEN:** Inhaled vaping chemicals make it harder for oxygen to move through your bloodstream. Quitting can help ensure your muscles, brain, and heart have enough oxygen to keep you active and healthy.
- **ENDOTHELIAL DAMAGE:** Your endothelium, the thin membrane lining your blood vessels, helps to regulate blood pressure by contracting and dilating. Quitting can make it easier for the endothelium to operate properly, reducing the risk of clot formation.

It is important to remember that the effects of vaping are not limited to your cardiovascular system. Your lungs can also suffer, especially with prolonged use. Whether you vape, smoke cigarettes, or use other tobacco products, the damage can be serious—and permanent in some cases. If you currently use these products, quitting now can prevent further damage. Connect with your healthcare provider to ask about nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) or other support programs that can help you set a quit date, build a strong support system, and boost your chances of success.



Healthy Sweet And Sour Chicken

This familiar dish gets a health upgrade and tastes so delicious with the addition of a homemade lower-sugar sweet and sour sauce plus many nutritious veggies. This recipe cooks quickly on the stovetop for an easy weeknight dinner the family will love.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. In a small bowl, combine the reserved $\frac{1}{2}$ cup pineapple juice, the ketchup, vinegar, coconut aminos, garlic powder, and ground ginger; whisk to combine. Slowly whisk in the cornstarch until no lumps remain. Set aside the sweet and sour sauce.
2. In a medium bowl, combine the chicken pieces with the salt and pepper; toss well to coat.
3. Place a large skillet over medium-high heat. When the skillet is hot, add 1 teaspoon of oil and reduce the heat slightly. Add the chicken and cook 2-3 minutes without stirring. Flip the chicken pieces over when they release easily from the pan and are lightly browned. Continue cooking until the chicken is almost cooked through. Transfer chicken to a plate and increase the heat for the pan to medium-high heat.
4. Add the remaining 2 teaspoons of oil to the same skillet (no need to wipe it out first) and swirl to coat the bottom. Add the onion and carrots; cook, stirring often, for 4 minutes. Add the bell peppers and continue cooking, stirring often, until the vegetables are crisp tender, 4-5 minutes more.
5. Return the cooked chicken to the skillet and add the drained pineapple chunks to the skillet. Stir the sweet and sour sauce again, then pour it over the ingredients in the skillet. Cook, stirring frequently, until the sauce thickens and the vegetables are tender.
6. Remove the skillet from the heat. If desired, garnish with sliced green onions and/or sesame seeds.
7. Store leftovers in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 4 days.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 (14-OUNCE) CAN OF PINEAPPLE CHUNKS in 100% juice; drained ($\frac{1}{2}$ cup juice reserved)
- $\frac{1}{3}$ CUP KETCHUP
- 3 TABLESPOONS RICE VINEGAR or apple cider vinegar
- 2 TABLESPOONS COCONUT AMINOS*
- $\frac{1}{2}$ TEASPOON GARLIC POWDER
- $\frac{1}{2}$ TEASPOON GROUND GINGER
- 1 TABLESPOON CORNSTARCH (or $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons arrowroot starch)
- 1 LB. BONELESS, SKINLESS CHICKEN BREAST, cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch pieces
- $\frac{1}{2}$ TEASPOON FINE SALT
- $\frac{1}{8}$ TEASPOON BLACK PEPPER
- 1 TABLESPOON AVOCADO OIL or olive oil, divided
- 2 MEDIUM BELL PEPPERS, any color, cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch pieces (2 cups)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ MEDIUM YELLOW ONION, cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch pieces (1 cup)
- 2 MEDIUM CARROTS, peeled and thinly sliced (1 cup)
- OPTIONAL GARNISH: 2 green onions, thinly sliced, and sesame seeds

NUTRITION INFO (per 1 1/2 cups)

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| Calories | 275 |
| Total Fat | 7g |
| Total Carbohydrate | 25g |
| Dietary Fiber | 3g |
| Protein | 27g |