

Heart Health

February is American Heart Month. Heart disease and its ties with lifestyle, diet, and habits were described very early in biblical stories. In the first book of Samuel, the author describes an incident in which David encounters Nabal a king in Maon. Abigail, Nabal's wife had just met with David and his army to spare the Maonites from David's wrath but had not told Nabal of the meeting until the next day:

³⁶When Abigail went to Nabal, he was in the house holding a banquet like that of a king. He was in high spirits and very drunk. So she told him nothing at all until daybreak. ³⁷Then in the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him all these things, and his heart failed him and he became like a stone.

³⁸About ten days later, the Lord struck Nabal and he died.

1 Samuel 25:36-38, NRSV

I want to share some ideas about to help mitigate heart disease. Everyone hears the adage to 'choose your parents wisely' when it comes to predictors of heart disease – it is true that genetics play a very important factor in the risk of having heart disease, but there are many things you can do to reduce that risk.

Regular moderate exercise is key to a heart healthy lifestyle. According to experts from Johns Hopkins, three categories of exercise are beneficial and can be started by anyone: Aerobic exercise, resistance training (strength work), and stretching, flexibility, and balance exercise.

Aerobic exercise reduces heart risk by improving blood circulation and vascular tone. It ultimately reduces overall stress to the heart and helps to maintain the heart's ability to respond to stress. Ideally, one should aim for about 30 minutes of moderate exercise 5 days a week is a good regimen. One can certainly have a variety to achieve this goal. Walking, running, cycling, swimming, golfing (especially when walking the course), and tennis are the most popular sports. Even household chores such as gardening, raking leaves, and lawn mowing (with a push mower) are great forms of aerobic exercise.

Resistance training (strength work) is another useful aspect of regular exercise. It builds lean muscular mass and help to reduce body fat.

It also has been shown to reduce LDL (bad) cholesterol while increasing HDL (good) cholesterol. One should aim for two nonconsecutive days a week and work out with resistance bands, free weights (may want to get some instruction), weight machines, or through-body resistance exercises such as push-ups, squats lunges, and the like. Start low and slow and focus on core exercises (abdominal, chest, and back).

Finally stretching, flexibility, and balance exercises (especially with intentional breathing and relaxation techniques like yoga and Tai chi) are key to musculoskeletal health to enable you to do the other exercises without harm to your joints, reducing muscular cramping and improving balance.

Fortunately, smoking tobacco has become less prevalent in society as it is a major risk factor for stroke and heart attack. Smoking reduces HDL (good) cholesterol levels and raises LDL (bad) cholesterol levels in the body. It also alters the reactivity and suppleness of blood vessels (vascular tone) and increases the buildup of plaque in arteries. Tobacco also affects the clotting of blood, making it more likely to develop clots (called thromboses) and those breaking off to clog arteries (called emboli). These are what lead to heart attacks and strokes. Although research in smoking other substances (such as marijuana and 'vaping') is very limited, these habits may have similar effects that tobacco smoking has.

Other key elements to a 'heart healthy' lifestyle include a good diet by reducing processed foods such as bacon, sugars, starches and consuming green leafy vegetables, plant fats (like avocado and olive oils), fresh fish, and lean meats. There are many resources available for altering your diet to reduce your risk of increasing your levels of 'bad' cholesterol and helping to maintain an ideal body weight. Coupling a good diet with maintaining a healthy body weight and reducing excessive alcohol consumption lowers your risk of chronic heart disease, heart attacks, and stroke.

So, to avoid being Nabal (whose very name means 'Fool'), the five things you can do to reduce your risk of heart disease:

- Stop smoking
- Regular moderate exercise
- A healthy diet
- Avoid excessive alcohol consumption
- Maintaining a reasonable body weight

