



Living a *Heart Healthy* Life

What You Can Do Right Now to Fight Off Heart Disease

By **Mindy Toran**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, heart disease is the No. 1 killer of Americans today. Nearly 2,400 people die each day from heart and blood vessel diseases, and more than 7 million Americans have suffered a heart attack in their lifetime, according to the American Heart Association. But there are many things you can do to prevent heart disease and to live a heart-healthy life, even if you are at high risk for heart disease.

Positive Changes

By making positive changes in your lifestyle—through a healthy diet, exercise, sleep and stress management—you can actually reduce your risk for heart disease.

“We know that even small changes can make a big difference in living a better life,” says Joanne Luczak Marzo, APN-C, Director of the Outpatient Heart Failure Program at Lourdes Cardiology Heart Failure Center in Cherry Hill, NJ. “A healthy diet and lifestyle are your best weapons in the fight against heart disease,” she stresses.

There are many risk factors that can be controlled when it comes to heart disease. The American Heart Association has come up with some basic steps, “Life’s Simple 7,” that can help add quality years to your life, says Ann Marie Sheehan, an RN at the Lourdes Cardiology Heart Failure Center. These suggestions include:

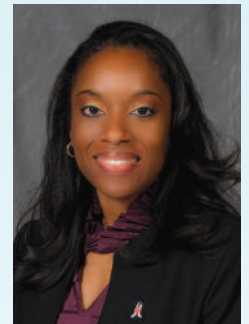
- Quit smoking
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Engage in regular physical activity
- Eat a healthy diet
- Manage blood pressure
- Take charge of cholesterol



Joanne Luczak Marzo,
APN-C

- Keep blood sugar, or glucose, at healthy levels

“The investment you make in your health now will be reaped later in life,” says Renee Bullock-Palmer, MD, director of the Women’s Heart Center at the Deborah Heart and Lung Center. “While it’s often challenging to live a heart healthy life in today’s fast-paced environment, you have to make a conscious decision to focus on your own well-being.”



Renee Bullock-Palmer,
MD

Direct Effects

Adopting a heart-healthy lifestyle can improve outcomes for people with heart disease by controlling high blood sugar, lowering blood pressure, and improving both their pulmonary function and overall quality of life, says Sheehan.

Something as simple as getting a good night’s sleep can have a significant effect on your heart health. “People who don’t sleep adequately tend to gain more weight because their hormones are out of balance, their judgment may not be optimal if they are not sleeping enough, and they are at higher risk for conditions such as



David J. Badolato, MD

hypertension,” says Michael Nolleto, MD, director of the Institute for Sleep Medicine at the Deborah Heart and Lung Center in Browns Mills, N.J.

While many of us know that eating certain foods can increase the risk of heart disease, it’s often tough to change our eating habits. According to the American Heart Association, by limiting the intake of saturated and trans fats, you can reduce your

blood cholesterol and lower your risk of coronary artery disease. High blood cholesterol can lead to a buildup of plaques in your arteries, called atherosclerosis, which can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Fruits, vegetables, fish, fiber-rich whole grains and a low-sodium diet provide a good foundation for heart-healthy eating, in addition to limiting sugar sweetened beverages and avoiding meats and saturated fats, says Sheehan.

“To pinpoint exactly what makes food healthy, you need to look at what the food contains and offers. Healthy foods provide you with essential nutrients like vitamins and minerals. Fiber can help you feel ‘full’ and keeps your GI system moving regularly and can help lower your cholesterol, and protein gives you energy and keeps your muscles strong,” says Luczak Marzo.

When you eat a healthy diet and participate in moderate physical exercise, it is easier to maintain a healthy weight, manage your blood pressure and control your cholesterol and blood sugar levels. In addition, if you currently take prescription medications, it’s important to continue taking your medications regularly, as prescribed, even when you are feeling well, she adds. “Never stop taking a medication unless you speak with your health-care provider first.”

Get Checked Out

One way to determine your heart health is to have a health-risk assessment performed by your physician, who will then create a risk profile to identify what lifestyle changes are best for you. A health-risk assessment looks at medical, family and social factors, such as blood pressure and cholesterol levels, history of heart disease, stroke and other medical issues, and lifestyle choices such as smoking and alcohol intake.

“In addition to the traditional medical history, it’s also important to look at occupational, spiritual and relationship factors in an individual’s life. When we’re talking about heart health, we need to look at the whole individual,” says David J. Badolato, M.D., of Concierge Medical Services in Ft. Washington, PA. Badolato’s integrative holistic medicine practice focuses on the interplay between the mind, body, emotion and spirit—each of which is equally important to physical

health and well-being.

“When performing a health-risk assessment, we look for lifestyle choices that may be higher risk, such as the use of alcohol, tobacco or other substances; identify stressors related to work, relationships or family; and look at sleep patterns and eating habits, in order to develop a risk profile of that individual. We can then work together with the intent to ‘normalize’ that risk profile,” Badolato explains.

When your heart is not healthy, it can have a negative impact on all the other aspects of your life. “Focusing on building loving relationships is probably one of the most heart-healthy things you can do,” stresses Badolato. “In addition to eating right, exercising and getting enough sleep, you need positive energy in order to maintain a healthy life.”

Deborah Heart and Lung Center knows this as well, using meditation, relaxation and yoga breath work as a part of their recovery process for surgical patients. “Yoga provides a natural benefit which can help to improve healing time and decreases pain,” says Sudha Allitt, PhD, founder and executive director of the Kula-Kumala Foundation, a nonprofit yoga center that works in conjunction with Deborah and other healthcare facilities to promote patients’ health and wellness. Studies indicate that yoga can help reduce blood pressure, blood cholesterol, body weight and blood glucose levels in people with heart disease or who are at risk for heart disease, she notes.

By making a conscious choice to eat healthy, exercise, stop smoking, reduce stress, and undergo regular medical check-ups, you can begin to live a heart-healthy life that will have benefits far into the future. **LW**

resources

Concierge Medical Services

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Institute for Sleep Medicine at the Deborah Heart and Lung Center Women’s Heart Center at the Deborah Heart and Lung Center

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