The Wellness News

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Issue 28, February 2010

Heart Health and Awareness

Our hearts work hard to support us, but are we taking good care of them in return? Heart disease is the leading cause of mortality in the United States. The good news is many of the contributing factors to heart disease are related to lifestyle choices making it a very preventable condition.

What is Heart Disease?

Heart disease, or cardiovascular disease, is a broad term used to describe a number of conditions that affect your cardiovascular system including narrowed and hardened arteries, diseases of the blood vessels, and irregular heart palpitations. When people think of heart disease they are most commonly thinking of coronary heart disease, which is the narrowing of the arteries leading to the heart that can result in a heart attack. Lifestyle risk factors that can lead to heart disease include inactivity, obesity, high blood pressure, high LDL cholesterol, high stress levels, and tobacco use.

Check Your Risk:

Regularly checking your vitals can keep you informed about your personal risk for heart disease and where you may need to make some changes:

Monitor your blood pressure: Make sure to check your blood pressure at every doctor's appointment. You may want to check it more frequently if high blood pressure is a concern. Your blood pressure can tell you how hard your heart is working. Ideally, your numbers will fall under 120/80. Some changes to diet, such as decreasing sodium intake, and regular exercise can help control blood pressure.

Track your cholesterol: Ask your doctor to measure your cholesterol at least once every two years. If your numbers are high, the doctor might have you track your cholesterol more frequently. Too much cholesterol in your blood can build up in the walls of your arteries, narrowing or even blocking the passage of blood flow. Aim for total cholesterol under 200 and an LDL (or bad cholesterol) under 100. Just like with blood pressure, incorporating regular physical activity along with making adjustments to your diet, such as reducing saturated fats and eliminating trans fats can help.

Watch your blood sugar: People with diabetes are two times as likely to suffer from a heart attack or a stroke. In fact, heart disease is the leading cause of death for people with diabetes. Have your doctor test your blood glucose levels once every 3 years after the age of 45. Steps toward prevention include managing your weight, choosing foods low in fat and calories, and aiming to get around 30 minutes of activity each day.

According to researchers, the average American's heart attack risk can be cut by more than 80 percent by adopting five lifestyle factors: not smoking, eating a healthy diet, maintaining a healthy weight, regular physical activity, and light to moderate alcohol consumption.

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Protect your Heart

There are many lifestyle habits that can help keep your heart healthy. Here are some great strategies to put into practice:

Quit smoking: Roughly 20% of deaths from heart disease are directly related to smoking. Tobacco use, specifically nicotine, is associated with narrowed and damaged blood vessels. The damaged blood vessels result in decreased oxygen levels to the heart, along with increased blood pressure and heart rate. In addition, smoking is associated with an increased occurrence of blood clots. Tobacco cessation will drastically reduce your risk for heart disease.

Maintain a healthy weight: Having a waist circumference over 40 inches for men or over 35 inches for women, or having a BMI over 25, can significantly increase your risk for heart disease. Excess weight puts significant stress on your heart and is linked with other conditions related to heart disease including high blood pressure and cholesterol, as well as diabetes. Check with your doctor to figure out an ideal weight range for you.

Get regular physical activity: Inactivity is linked with higher occurrences of heart disease, in addition to higher rates of obesity, hypertension, and diabetes. Regular moderate exercise for at least 30 minutes 5 days each week can greatly reduce your risk of developing these conditions. Try brisk walks, dancing, jumping rope, swimming, aerobics classes, or organized sports.

Find a healthy outlet for stress: Although researchers are still learning more about what sort of role stress plays in the development of heart disease, there is certainly a correlation. Learning to manage stress can help reduce your body's exposure to elevated stress hormones, as well as help to reduce blood pressure. Different strategies work well for different people, but a good start is to practice deep breathing: inhale through your nose for 5 seconds, pause, and breathe out through your mouth for 10 seconds.

Weight Improvement: Including at least 3 servings of whole grains in your diet may be linked with weight management. Researchers associate this link with the satisfaction derived from eating foods high in fiber and nutrients. The fiber in whole grains provides volume and slows the digestion process, both important components when trying to feel full on fewer calories.

Practice Good Nutrition

Poor food choices can raise cholesterol levels, elevate blood pressure, and contribute to obesity.

- Pick nutrient rich foods, including fruits and vegetables, whole grains, nuts, legumes, fish, and vegetable oils.
- Increase your intake of omega 3 fats, found in nuts, seeds, and fish.
- Limit your intake of saturated fats, including whole milk, red meats, butter, and cheese, as well as many baked goods.
- Read labels to avoid trans fats, also known as partially hydrogenated oils, which can raise your bad cholesterol while lowering your good cholesterol. Trans fats can be found in fried foods and many packaged goods including cookies, crackers, pies, cakes, chips, and margarine.
- Reduce your intake of sodium and added sugars. Make non processed foods the bulk of your diet.

Call Your Health Coach for More Information 1-800-343-3822

Sources: http://www.mayoclinic.com; http://www.americanheart.org; http://www.diseaseriskindex.harvard.edu; http://www.cdc.gov/heartDisease/facts.htm, http://www.webmd.com/heart-disease/guide/stress-heart-attack-risk