



FEBRUARY 2021:  
HEALTH COACHING HINTS

# TAKING CARE OF YOUR HEART

February is centered around making healthy lifestyle choices to keep YOUR HEART happy.

## **Health Coaching Hint #1: Eat a Mediterranean Diet**

When it comes to eating to reduce your risk for or symptoms of cardiovascular disease, the general consensus (according to the American Heart Association and American College of Cardiology) is to eat a diet that is focused on fruits and vegetables, legumes, nuts, whole grains, lean vegetable or animal protein (preferably fish), and avoiding high quantities of saturated fats and trans fats.

The Mediterranean Diet is a great way to meet all of these recommendations.

More a way of life than an actual diet, the Mediterranean Diet is characterized by:

- Daily consumption of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and healthy fats
- Weekly intake of fish, poultry, beans, and eggs
- Moderate portions of dairy products
- Limited intake of red meat

Going beyond just the food, a Mediterranean way of eating also focuses on the social aspect of meals and the idea of sharing this time with friends or family, which have also been shown to have an influence on improving the symptoms of or reducing the risk of heart disease.

[Learn more about the Mediterranean diet from the Mayo clinic through this link: https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/mediterranean-diet/art-20047801.](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/mediterranean-diet/art-20047801)

## Health Coaching Hint #2: Exercise for your Heart

Beyond food, one of the most impactful lifestyle behaviors to influence your heart health is getting an adequate amount of exercise each week.

Why is this?

A sedentary lifestyle is one of the five major risk factors for cardiovascular disease (along with high blood pressure, abnormal values for blood lipids, smoking, and obesity). Reducing these risk factors can greatly reduce your risk of a heart attack or stroke.

Exercise, alone, has been shown to:

- Increase your exercise tolerance
- Reduce overall body weight
- Reduce blood pressure
- Reduce bad (LDL and total) cholesterol
- Increase good (HDL) cholesterol
- Increase insulin sensitivity

The question becomes, how much exercise is enough? According to the American College for Sports Medicine, the average adult should get 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise each week with at least two or more days of strength training.

If it has been a while since you kept a regular exercise routine or if you are concerned about being healthy enough to start exercising, we recommended you talk to your healthcare practitioner before getting started. For many, you may need to start with less than the recommended amount each week and work your way up to them gradually.

## Health Coaching Hint #3: Alcohol, Smoking & Your Heart

When it comes to recreational habits that can have a negative impact on your heart, drinking alcohol and smoking are two of the most common ones that come to mind.

With alcohol, the research is mixed on if there is an amount that is healthy to consume. Despite this uncertainty, a universal understanding is that if you do choose to consume alcohol, and you don't have an underlying health condition that could be adversely affected by it, you should do so with moderation. For women, this is no more than one drink per day, and no more than two per day for men.

The problem with alcohol comes from what is known as binge drinking. The abuse of alcohol can have negative impacts on your health, not only being linked to heart disease but also motor vehicle crashes, violence, sexual risk behaviors, and various cancers. If you feel you have a problem with alcohol and would like to get help to quit or reduce your consumption, these are a few resources you can use to get started:

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- Alcoholism website: [www.alcohol.org](http://www.alcohol.org)
- Alcoholics Anonymous: [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)

As for smoking, there is no amount that does not lead to negative impacts on your health. According to the CDC, smoking “leads to disease and disability and harms nearly every organ system of the body” and is the “leading cause of preventable death”. When it comes to your heart, smoking can increase your blood pressure, heart rate, and risk for blood clots. It can reduce blood flow to your heart and the amount of oxygen that reaches your body’s tissues. Even second-hand smoke can have a negative impact on your health.

The positive here is that once you quit smoking, you can reduce your risk for heart disease, having another heart attack, and even death by heart disease by half (3). However, quitting alone can be a challenge for many. Having a plan and support can go a long way toward being successful. These resources can help you:

- Free Hotline: 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1800-784-8669)
- Quit Plan website: [smokefree.gov](http://smokefree.gov)
- FDA-approved products: <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/want-quit-smoking-fda-approved-products-can-help>

## Health Coaching Hint #4: Managing Stress for a Healthy Heart

It may seem strange to think that daily stressors can have an influence on your heart health. However, when you think about how your body responds to stress it makes more sense.

In a stressful situation, whether you’re dealing with a looming deadline at work or running from a lion, your body responds in the same way. Through a chain of events, your body releases a flood of cortisol and epinephrine (adrenaline) preparing your body to deal with the stressor. This is the fight-or-flight response.

This response was a great aid in helping your ancestors survive by being able to get away from danger (like a lion). The stressful event would happen, your ancestor would survive, and once the event was over they would move completing the stress cycle. The problem these days is when this physiological response becomes chronic, or lasts over an extended period of time. When this happens, it can lead to chronic inflammation--a known cause for cardiovascular disease.

The good news is you can do something about it. By creating a system for managing stress, you can reduce your risk for heart disease. Some ideas to help you get started include:

**Stay positive.** Research has shown that those people with heart disease who maintain a more positive, upbeat attitude are less likely to die than those with a negative attitude. Make a point to have a good belly laugh each day or keep a gratitude journal to help you focus on the positive.

**Meditate.** A regular practice of deep breathing with mindful, non-judgmental awareness of your thoughts has been shown to reduce blood pressure, a risk factor for heart disease. Even just a few minutes a day can go a long way toward improving your heart health. Not sure about meditating, activities like prayer and yoga can also have a similar effect.

**Exercise.** One of the best ways to counter-stress, exercise releases mood-boosting endorphins and is also a great way to reduce blood pressure, strengthen your heart, and can help you maintain a healthy weight. Find a way to get some movement every day if you can.

**Unplug.** Taking time away from the hustle and bustle that our electronics bring to our lives can go a long way toward reducing stress. Limit your time to a specific window or take an entire day to unplug and give your mind a break.