

February is American Heart Month, a time where we can focus on cardiovascular health. Heart disease remains the leading cause of death among men and women in the U.S. and worldwide (Mortality in United States, 2020). This is an area where preventative medicine can have a profound impact. Avoiding known risk factors such as physical inactivity, high fat/high sodium diet, smoking along with regular checkups and prescribed medications, we can lower the impact of heart disease. Let's examine all these factors in detail.

Movement expends calories. We can classify burning calories in two categories; exercise and physical activity. Exercise is scheduled, repetitive and planned. Examples include going to the gym to work out or taking a daily walk. Physical activity is defined as the calories expended by your activities of daily living. Examples include walking from your car into work, up 3 flights of stairs or pushing a grocery cart. Whether you burn calories via exercise, physical activity or a combination of both, it all accumulates towards the goal of a healthy heart. Some may never exercise but are very healthy as they walk and check fences of their farm every morning, so don't feel you need to "exercise", you just need to get moving. Our Hearts are healthier when we increase movement. Even small changes can make a big difference. Consider parking farther away from work in the parking lot to get more steps. Use lunch breaks for walks. Consider a standing desk. Use any down time as an opportunity to get more steps. Many smart phones and watches count your steps, set a daily goal and work to beat it. Aim for at least 2 1/2 hours of moderate physical activity every week. Doing heart healthy activities with a friend will keep both of you inspired (a dog can be the most reliable workout partner!). If you want to take your health a step further, consider joining a local fitness center, group exercises classes or personal training!

Striving towards a healthy heart will pair well with healthy eating habits. A low fat, low sodium diet that is high in fruits and vegetables is a great way to take care of your heart. To start, it is best when all members of the household are on board with the new adventure of adopting a healthy lifestyle. For example, Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan can successfully lower high blood pressure. Often, the DASH eating plan doesn't require special foods, instead you can alter your favorites foods and recipes to eliminate high amounts of fat and sodium to be more heart healthy. Food high in fats are often a result of the preparation, avoid fried foods as this greatly increases the fat content. For example, one baked potato will have 93 calories with 0 grams of fat. Compare that to the same amount of potato in french fries that have 312 calories and 15 grams of fat! Sodium can also have negative health consequences when consumed in large quantities. This additional sodium can lead to an increase in blood pressure (hypertension). While sodium is a preservative, it is found in large quantities in prepackaged foods. Opting for fresh food items can reduce the sodium intake and get you on your way to a healthier heart! A conversation with a registered dietician can be a great way to get started towards a healthy eating lifestyle.

If a person smokes, they should consider making a strong effort to kick the habit. Smokers are up to 4 times more likely to develop heart disease or to have a stroke compared to nonsmokers. In as little as 1 year after quitting smoking the risk of a heart attack drops sharply. In this area, asking for help can greatly increase your chances of success. Talk to your family so they are on board

with your goals, and they can help eliminate triggering urges to smoke. The Meigs County Health Department offers a Tobacco Cessation Program for those interested.

A regular check up with a primary care physician can help identify the risk factors one might have contributing to heart disease. Smoking, being overweight, diabetes, dyslipidemia or a family history of heart disease are all red flags. Red flags that can be identified. Once you are aware of your risk factors, develop a plan with your clinician to get your heart healthy. Track your progress over time to monitor success. You can stop in to the Meigs County Health Department periodically for a health screening. To learn more about these services and more, visit our website at www.meigs-health.com or by calling (740) 992-6626 during normal business hours.

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