

U.S. lifestyles thwarting heart health progress: report

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While there's been improvement, Americans still need to get off the couch and eat right.

(HealthDay)— Although significant progress has been made in the United States in terms of decreasing smoking and lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels, a new report warns that cardiovascular disease—including heart disease and stroke—still causes the death of one American every 40 seconds.

The [report](#) from the American Heart Association emphasizes that two big factors stand in the way of improving U.S. heart health: poor [eating habits](#) and a lack of physical activity.

"It always comes down to the same things: diet and exercise. It's a big, constant slap in the face that we're just not doing well as a country, and we're passing this on to our children," said Dr. Suzanne Steinbaum, a

preventive [cardiologist](#) at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, and a spokesperson for the American Heart Association (AHA).

Steinbaum was not involved in writing the current report, which was published in the first January 2013 issue of the journal *Circulation*.

The [American Heart Association](#) previously set a goal of reducing heart disease and stroke deaths by 20 percent by 2020. But if the current trends continue, America's heart health may only improve by 6 percent by 2020, according to the report.

"It is discouraging that we're not going to be meeting those goals," said Dr. Kenneth Ong, acting chief in the division of cardiology at the Brooklyn Hospital Center in New York City.

What's even more discouraging is that the biggest reasons Americans may not meet these goals are potentially preventable [lifestyle factors](#).

The report found that more than 68 percent of Americans are overweight or obese, and nearly 35 percent are obese. In addition, almost 32 percent of children between the ages of 2 and 19 are overweight or obese.

Nearly one-third of all adults get no [aerobic activity](#) each week. And, maybe worse, almost 18 percent of high school girls and 10 percent of high school boys are getting less than an hour of aerobic activity each week.

Diet and exercise aren't the only culprits for America's cardiovascular problem. The investigators found that 21 percent of adult men and about 17 percent of adult women still smoke. And, 18 percent of high school kids are smokers, according to the report.

High [cholesterol levels](#) affect almost 14 percent of American adults, and one-third of Americans have high blood pressure. Just over 8 percent of people in the United States have been diagnosed with diabetes, the report noted.

"Somewhere along the line, we lost our understanding of what it means to be healthy," Steinbaum said. "These findings are reflective of the life we're living, of [eating] fast, processed cheap foods."

But, Steinbaum added that she's seen plenty of success in her office. "I've seen people take ownership of their issues and change once they realize that if they can take care of themselves, they don't have to be sick. Now we need to figure out how to personalize public health initiatives," she said.

The AHA report recommends working with health care systems to reward providers who help their patients improve their behaviors and their health. It also suggests working with educators to support healthy diets and exercise for children. Employers and insurers can offer wellness programs and cover preventive services. In communities, the AHA recommends ensuring green spaces are available for physical activity, and that there is access to healthy foods.

But what can individuals do? Steinbaum said if you're a smoker, quitting smoking will have the biggest and most immediate impact on your [heart health](#).

Both Steinbaum and Ong suggested starting with small steps. "Just go out for a walk. It's a simple thing that can make a difference. If you can't get out for a walk, even standing instead of sitting is better for you," Ong said.

Steinbaum's recommendation: "Do one little thing [each day] to make

your lives healthier for a month. By the end of the month, you have 30 new healthy things. Instead of a Danish one day, have oatmeal," she said. "The next day, park your car a little further away. Make tiny changes. If you think about having to lose 60 pounds, it can be overwhelming, but you can do tiny things."

More information: Learn more about good nutrition from the [American Heart Association](#).

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