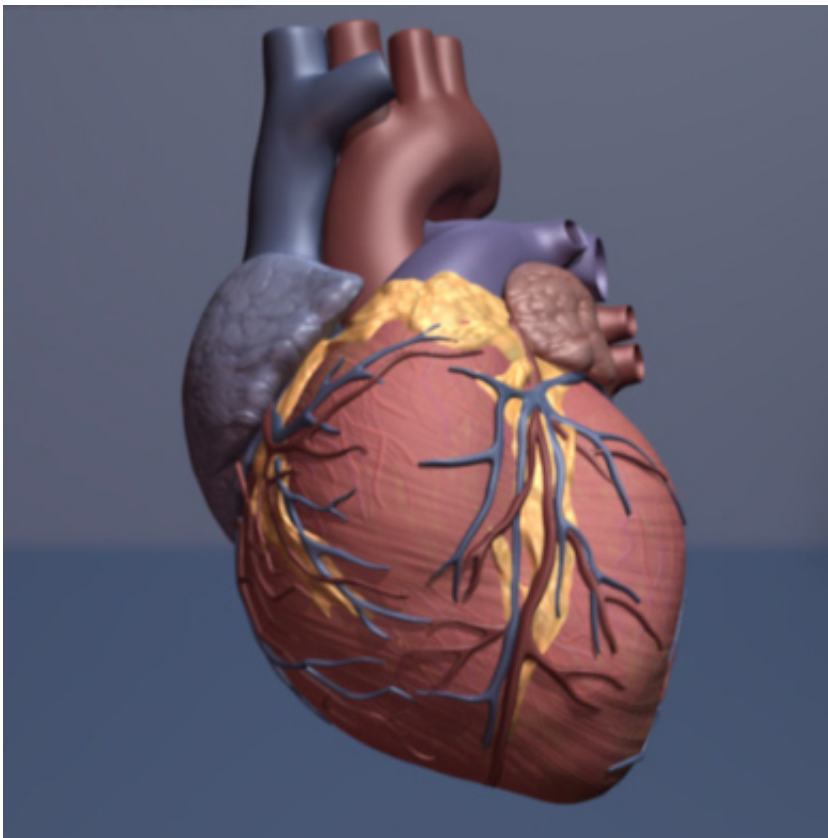


Home remedies: Lifestyle affects your heart health

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Human heart. Credit: copyright American Heart Association

Heart disease can be improved—or even prevented—by making certain lifestyle changes. The following changes can help anyone who wants to improve heart health:

Stop smoking. Smoking is a major risk factor for [heart disease](#), especially atherosclerosis. Quitting is the best way to reduce your risk of [heart disease](#) and its complications.

Control your [blood pressure](#). Ask your doctor for a [blood pressure measurement](#) at least every two years. He or she may recommend more frequent measurements if your blood pressure is higher than normal or you have a history of heart disease. Optimal blood pressure is less than 120 systolic and 80 diastolic, as measured in millimeters of mercury (mm Hg).

Check your cholesterol. Ask your doctor for a baseline cholesterol test when you're in your 20s and then at least every five years. You may need to start testing earlier if high cholesterol is in your family. If your test results aren't within desirable ranges, your doctor may recommend more frequent measurements. Most people should aim for an LDL level below 130 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL), or 3.4 millimoles per liter (mmol/L). If you have other risk factors for heart disease, you should aim for an LDL below 100 mg/dL (2.6 mmol/L). If you're at very high risk of heart disease—if you've already had a [heart attack](#) or have diabetes, for example—aim for an even lower LDL level—below 70 mg/dL (1.8 mmol/L).

Keep diabetes under control. If you have diabetes, tight blood sugar control can help reduce the risk of heart disease.

Move. Exercise helps you achieve and maintain a healthy weight and control diabetes, elevated cholesterol and high blood pressure—all risk factors for heart disease. If you have a heart arrhythmia or heart defect, there may be some restrictions on the activities you can do, so talk to your doctor. With your doctor's OK, aim for 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity most days of the week.

Eat healthy foods. A heart-healthy diet based on fruits, vegetables and whole grains—and low in saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium and added sugar—can help you control your weight, blood pressure and cholesterol.

Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight increases your risk of heart disease. A BMI of less than 25 and a waist circumference of 35 inches (88.9 centimeters) or less is the goal for preventing and treating heart disease.

Manage stress. Reduce stress as much as possible. Practice techniques for managing stress, such as muscle relaxation and deep breathing.

Deal with depression. Being depressed can increase your risk of heart disease significantly. Talk to your doctor if you feel hopeless or uninterested in your life.

Practice good hygiene. Stay away from people with infectious diseases such as colds, get vaccinated against the flu, regularly wash your hands, and brush and floss your teeth regularly to keep yourself well.

Also, get regular [medical checkups](#). Early detection and treatment can set the stage for a lifetime of better [heart health](#).

COPING AND SUPPORT

You may feel frustrated, upset or overwhelmed upon learning you or your loved one has heart disease. Fortunately, there are ways to help cope with heart disease or improve your condition. These include:

Cardiac rehabilitation. For people who have cardiovascular disease that's caused a heart attack or has required surgery to correct, [cardiac rehabilitation](#) is often recommended as a way to improve treatment and speed recovery. Cardiac rehabilitation involves levels of monitored

exercise, nutritional counseling, emotional support, and support and education about lifestyle changes to reduce your risk of heart problems.

Support groups. Turning to friends and family for support is essential, but if you need more help, talk to your doctor about joining a support group. You may find that talking about your concerns with others with similar difficulties can help.

Continued medical checkups. If you have a recurring or chronic heart condition, regularly check in with your doctor to make sure you're properly managing your heart condition.

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