

Good for your heart: Heart health tips for a long life

February 19 2021, by Barbara Quinn



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It's only about the size of your fist. Yet every day your heart pumps the amount of blood that could fill a 2,000 gallon tank. Its job? To keep a constant supply of oxygen and nutrient-rich blood flowing through

60,000 miles of blood vessels to feed every cell and tissue in your body.

Unfortunately, we rarely give this amazing organ that is so vital to life the attention it deserves ... until something goes wrong. And that happens more than it should. In fact, according to the American Heart Association (AHA), diseased hearts kill more Americans every year than any other condition.

Coronary heart disease is the most common problem we have with our hearts, says the AHA. And it's a condition often due to a lack of preventive maintenance on our part. Over time, fat, cholesterol and other substances build up inside the arteries—the pipeline that carries essential nutrients and oxygen throughout our bodies. If we don't take steps to prevent it, this "plaque" can eventually block the flow of life-giving blood which leads to a [heart attack](#) or stroke.

What are the steps that experts say can bolster a strong heart and save it from a lot of hurt? Don't smoke. (Chemicals in cigarettes injure blood vessels and speed up the build up of fatty plaque in your arteries.) Do what you can to lose excess body fat. (Extra weight puts an extra burden on your heart.) Follow doctor's orders to keep your [blood](#) pressure and cholesterol levels normal. (To keep arteries clear of obstructions.) And give your heart daily exercise like every other muscle in your body.

Diet is also a powerful strategy to keep our hard working hearts in tip top shape. Research has identified these important components of a heart nourishing diet: Several types of fruits and vegetables every day. Whole grain foods such as oats, popcorn and whole grain cereals. Protein foods that are low in saturated fat including fish, lean meats, eggs, nuts, beans and soy foods. Foods and oils high in monounsaturated and [polyunsaturated fats](#) such as olive, safflower, sesame, sunflower, soybean, canola and corn oils, nuts and nut butters and avocados.

We must also protect our hearts from certain ingredients that—when consumed in excess—can sicken our hearts and contribute to clogged arteries. Keep these, therefore, to a minimum: sodium (salt), sugar, alcohol, saturated and trans fats. Best way to monitor these in your diet: Refer to the Nutrition Facts label and compare products.

How do you put these ingredients together to make a meal that keeps your heart in good working order? Check out recipes from the American Heart Association: heart.org/en/recipes target="_blank">recipes.heart.org/en/recipes. Now you're cooking!

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Citation: Good for your heart: Heart health tips for a long life (2021, February 19) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-02-good-heart-health-life.html>

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