

Five tips to love your heart

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Heart disease remains the No. 1 cause of death in the U.S., with over 655,000 dying annually, according to the American Heart Association. In an ongoing effort to raise awareness around heart health and help prevent heart disease, February is recognized as Heart Month.

Dr. Amy Pollak, a Mayo Clinic cardiologist, says it's a great time to show yourself some love and offers her top five tips to keep your heart—and your body—in shape.

1. Know your numbers.

Aiming to maintain a healthy weight is important, but it is important to be aware of other numbers, especially your [blood pressure](#).

"While many of us know what we weigh, we may not be as aware of things like our [blood](#) pressure or cholesterol, which can significantly increase our risk for [heart attack](#) or stroke," says Dr. Pollak.

She says you should check your blood pressure two to three times a week. "You don't know if it's high or if it's at goal, unless you're checking it."

2. Feed your heart.

Research shows consuming food high in sugar, salt and saturated fat can increase the risk for [heart disease](#). But it's often difficult to change your eating habits.

Dr. Pollak says embracing a Mediterranean diet is the way to go:

Eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables. Besides being low in calories and rich in dietary fiber, fruits and vegetables are full of important vitamins and minerals.

Use olive oil when you cook or in salads instead of mayonnaise or other rich condiments.

Eat at least one serving of fish per week. Mayo Clinic's website and the

American Heart Association's website feature many recipes.

3. Cut the salt—and the sugar.

As good as it tastes, Dr. Pollak says too much sodium can cause [high blood pressure](#). Avoid processed foods, and stock up on a variety of herbs and spices to use in your cooking.

A diet that is low sugar is important, too. Monitoring your blood sugar levels is especially important if you have diabetes.

4. Move more.

"Keep your heart healthy by getting active," says Dr. Pollak.

American Heart Association guidelines recommend 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity or 75 minutes per week of vigorous activity. "Ideally, the goal would be five times a week, but it's important to find something — anything — you love to do that gets you moving, even if it's in small increments," adds Dr. Pollak. For instance, parking farther away from the grocery store entrance or taking the stairs at work instead of the elevator can count toward your fitness goals.

But don't fret if you miss a day here or there. "There are going to be periods in your week and in your month where that's not possible. So cut yourself some slack. And then just start fresh the next week."

5. Lighten your load.

Stress can be a trigger for many people, which can increase your blood pressure and lead to other unhealthy habits, such as smoking, difficulty sleeping and overeating. Dr. Pollak recommends making mindfulness a part of your daily routine as well as activities to help you relax. "It can be

challenging, but try to reduce your stress and anxiety. Stop smoking. Consider massage or yoga, or meditation. Make a cup of tea and curl up with a good book. Be thoughtful about the choices you make daily because your [heart](#) will thank you."

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