Reducing Your Risk For Coronary Heart Disease

The heart is the centre of your physical universe-responsible for pumping blood, oxygen and nutrients to the rest of your body. So then why then do so many of us neglect, even abuse this most vital of organs? Studies show that our country's aging baby boomer generation is actually in worse shape than today's seniors. The picture is even bleaker for today's youth with obesity rates tripling over the last quarter century.

Of course, it doesn't have to be this way. With a few healthy diet and exercise changes and the proactive tips below, you can keep your heart smart and strong.

How the Flow Slows

The heart is responsible for pumping blood and delivering nutrients and oxygen to the entire body. It also picks up cell waste excreted by the liver, lungs and kidneys. Coronary heart disease occurs when there is a build up of plaque along the pathways that supply blood to the heart. They become hardened, narrow and can't get blood and oxygen to the heart. This can result in angina (chest pain or discomfort) heart attack or heart failure.

Risk Factors

Certain medical factors put you at higher risk of developing coronary heart disease. Talk to your doctor about heart disease if you have:

- high blood pressure,
- diabetes,
- high cholesterol,
- a waist size over 35" for women and 40" for men, or
- a family history of heart disease.

Heart Stoppers

Learning *why and how* factors-whether physical, emotional or mental-that contribute to heart disease affect you, and taking steps to correct them, are the easiest ways to keep your heart healthy.

Smoking. Heart disease occurs 70 per cent more times in smokers than non-smokers. If that's not enough to make you quit, consider your hardening arteries, heightened blood pressure and elevated cholesterol levels, which prevent the heart from working properly. Talk to a health professional about quitting.

Obesity. Overweight people-especially those that accumulate fat around the midriff-are in greater danger of high blood pressure and heart disease. Take healthy steps to reduce your weight: talk to your physician about starting a realistic exercise and eating plan. Need help with healthy eating? Get expert eating support from a Registered Dietician.

Stress. Stress releases fatty acids and glucose into the blood stream which can form plaque on the artery wall. It can also spike blood pressure, increase cholesterol and boost your likelihood of smoking or drinking alcohol or caffeine. Blow off some steam by exercising, learning relaxation techniques like meditation and lightening up: recent studies show laughter is directly linked to good heart health.

Depression. Studies suggest people who have suffered from depression are four times more likely to have a heart attack. The medical community is still unsure of how the disease affects the heart, but suspect depression elevates the heart rate, boosts blood pressure and impairs blood cell clotting. If you think you may be experiencing depression, seek support from a mental health professional immediately.

The Man Myth

Heart disease has long been considered a 'man's' disease but this couldn't be further from the truth. More women succumb to heart disease than breast cancer-or all other cancers combined-every year.

Take These to Heart: Warning Signs

Warning signs of heart disease can be vague and misleading. Consult a physician if you experience one or several of the following as they may indicate heart problems or a heart attack:

- Chest discomfort: it may be short or long periods of time, from a squeeze to severe pain
- Pain in other body areas such as the back, neck, stomach, jaw or arms
- Shortness of breath
- Numbness in the arms
- Nausea or lightheadedness
- Indigestion and vomiting
- Cold sweats and dizziness
- Unusual fatigue
- Sleep disturbances
- Anxiety
- Headaches

Hearty Health Tips

Keeping your heart healthy can give both body and mind the boost it needs. Follow these tips to get the blood flowing-literally.

Exercise. Regular exercise has boundless bonuses including a reduction in the risk of heart attack by a quarter, helping to maintain a healthy weight and strengthening the arteries that pump blood. Studies also show exercise helps to relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety. So enjoy a walk, go for a bike ride or join a sports team. If you haven't been active for a while, enlist a friend and get moving together.

Eat properly. A diet rich in vegetables, fruit, whole grains and low-fat foods will help protect your heart. Since saturated and trans fats raise blood cholesterol make sure to keep these to a minimum. Trans fats are typically found in processed or fast foods. Learn to read labels and look specifically at fat, salt and sugar content-all of which can put trauma on your ticker.

Watch your weight. Any extra weight on your frame can contribute to high blood pressure, high cholesterol and even diabetes. This doesn't mean you should start fasting and exercising seven days a week. Use the 90/10 rule-eat healthy 90 % of the time and indulge the other 10. Research confirms that excess weight gained specifically around the middle-waist, abdomen, upper body-puts you at greater risk than those who are pear-shaped. Stay on track by enlisting the help of a medical professional, Registered Dietitian and/or a fitness instructor for tips and motivation.

See your doctor. Regular health check-ups could save your life so don't by-pass them. Ensure blood pressure and cholesterol are at healthy levels by having them checked often. While it may seem easier to turn a blind eye to heart concerns, remember: knowledge is power.

The heart keeps your body moving day in and day out. How you treat it can not only determine your quality of life but how long it lasts. Have a heart: treat your ticker with the respect it deserves by maintaining an active lifestyle, making healthy food choices and having regular 'heart-to-hearts' with your physician.