

How Healthy Is Your Heart?

When you hear the word “heart”, what image comes to mind? Do you think of the Valentine heart with lace edges? Do you think of “love”? Do you think of your own heart and how important it is to your overall health? If you pay attention to the media or popular culture, you’ll notice that the heart seems to be everywhere as there are many, many references to the heart in our movies, literature, advertising, television, and music. A successful advertising campaign for Chevrolet referred to their cars as “The Heartbeat of America”, most of us have heard the phrase “The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach” and who hasn’t attended an event when you were invited “To Eat Your Heart Out”? The heart holds a special place in our collective psyche and it has many other associations, too.

- “Have a heart” – meaning to be merciful
- “Change of heart” – meaning to change your mind
- “To know something by heart” – meaning to memorize something
- “To have a heavy heart” – meaning to grieve or be very sad
- “Broken heart” – meaning to lose love
- “Have your heart set on” – meaning to want something badly

Certainly no other organ in our body elicits these kinds of relationships, responses or attention.

Before 1900, very few people died of heart disease. Since then, heart disease has become a major health issue in the United States. The age of technology has made life easier and therefore made us more prone to heart problems. Before the industrial revolution, most people made their living through some form of manual labor and walking was the major mode of transportation. Accompanying the decline in physical activity came changes to the American diet...fried and processed foods and the advent of “fast food”. The combination of a sedentary lifestyle and a rich diet led to an increase in clogged blood vessels, heart attacks, and strokes. The rate of heart disease increased so sharply between 1940 and 1970 that the World Health Organization called it the world’s most serious epidemic.

We cannot live without our heart and everyone knows it is a vital organ. However, when you get right down to it, the heart is just a fist-sized pump that usually weighs less than one pound. A healthy heart beats steadily and rhythmically at a rate of about 60 to 100 beats per minute (the adult average is 72 when at rest) pumping about 1.3 gallons of blood per minute. This means that by the time someone is 70 years old their heart will likely have pumped about 48 million gallons! Arteries are the blood vessels that carry blood with oxygen and nutrients to all parts of the body. Veins are the blood vessels that carry blood depleted of oxygen and nutrients back to the heart and lungs. Blood brings oxygen and nutrients to the organs and tissues and picks up waste from the body’s cells. Waste products are removed as they filter through the kidneys, liver and lungs.

Heart disease is the number one cause of death in men and women, greater than the next five causes of death combined. Almost 2,000 Americans die of heart disease each day...that is one death every 44 seconds. According to recent estimates of the American Heart Association, over 64 million Americans have one or more forms of cardiovascular disease. Fortunately there are ways to significantly lower your chances of developing heart disease and in many instances reverse the effects of a current heart condition. Essentially improving your heart health boils down to three key areas:

Following a Heart Healthy Diet

- Limit the amount of red meat that you eat (animal products and saturated fat go hand in hand)
- Limit refined sugar intake from cakes, cookies, candy, etc.
- Use extra virgin olive oil and garlic in cooking as they can lower cholesterol
- Consume several servings of fruits and vegetables daily
- Avoid fried foods and highly-processed foods

Exercising Regularly

- Always stretch before and after exercising
- Exercise 3 to 4 times per week, for at least a half hour at a time (anyone beginning an exercise regimen should begin slowly and do so with their doctor's advice)
- Consider low impact exercises such as walking, swimming, bowling, table tennis, yoga, etc.

Leading a Healthy Lifestyle

- Stop smoking and avoid second-hand smoke
- Drink alcohol moderately; roughly one glass of red wine daily is acceptable
- Maintain bowel regularity
- Take off extra weight (even a few extra pounds increases the risk of heart disease)
- Maintain a positive attitude, reduce stress, cultivate social interactions, laugh frequently, engage your brain in learning something new
- Get 7 to 8 hours of quality sleep daily

Are you interested in learning more about your heart? The topic for the March 24th 11:30 am -1:00 pm Bits and Bites meeting (a bit of information and a bite to eat) of the Delta College "50+...Just Like Gold" program will focus on learning about healthy hearts. Lunch is included and only costs \$4.00 for 50+ members or \$10.00 for non members. If you are interested in attending this luncheon or in becoming a member of the Delta College 50+ program please call the Delta College LifeLong Learning Office at (989) 686-9364 or from the Midland area call (989) 495-4000, ext. 9364.

Don't put off your journey to a healthier heart. Start today by eating healthier, walking and sleeping more, reducing stress, making new friends and learning more about your heart.

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