

Your Guide to Improving Your Heart Health






Medically reviewed by [Uzochukwu Ibe, MD, MPH](#) — Written by [The Healthline Editorial Team](#) — Updated on April 22, 2024

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The most important lifestyle change you can make is to quit smoking, but there are other adjustments you can make to keep your heart healthy.

There are many steps you can take to help protect your health and blood vessels. Avoiding tobacco is one of the best.

In fact, smoking is one of the top controllable risk factors for heart disease. If you smoke or use other tobacco products, the [American Heart Association \(AHA\)](#) , [National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute](#)  (NHLBI), and [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)  (CDC) all encourage you to quit.

It can make a huge difference to your heart and overall health. However, other lifestyle changes, especially those related to diet, exercise, and mental health, can also help improve your heart health.

Heart-healthy diet changes

Manage excess body fat

Research in the [Journal of the American College of Cardiology](#) has linked excess belly fat to higher blood pressure and unhealthy blood lipid levels. If you're carrying extra fat around your middle, it may be time to make lifestyle adjustments. Eating fewer calories and watching your portion sizes more can make a big difference.

Include fiber into your diet

According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), a diet rich in soluble fiber can help lower your level of [low-density lipoprotein](#), or “bad cholesterol.” Sources of soluble [fiber](#) include beans, oats, barley, apples, pears, and avocados.


Make time for breakfast

The first meal of the day is an important one. Eating a nutritious breakfast every day can help you maintain a healthy diet and weight. To build a heart-healthy meal, reach for:

- whole grains, such as oatmeal, whole-grain cereals, or whole-wheat toast
- lean protein sources, such as turkey bacon or a small serving of nuts or peanut butter
- fruits and vegetables


Eat fish

Eating a diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids can also help ward off heart disease. Many fish, such as salmon, tuna, sardines, and herring, are rich sources of omega-3 fatty acids.

Try to eat fish at least twice a week, suggests the [AHA](#) . If you're concerned about mercury or other contaminants in fish, you may be happy to learn that its heart-healthy benefits tend to outweigh the risks for most people.

Eat nuts

Almonds, walnuts, pecans, and other tree nuts deliver a powerful punch of heart-healthy fats, protein, and fiber. Including them in your diet can help lower your risk of cardiovascular disease.

Remember to keep the serving size small, suggests the [AHA](#) . While nuts are full of healthy stuff, they're also high in calories.

Limit your salt intake

If the entire U.S. population reduced its average salt intake to half a teaspoon a day, it would significantly cut the number of people who develop coronary heart disease every year, report researchers in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#).

The authors suggest that salt is one of the leading drivers of rising healthcare costs in the United States. Processed and restaurant-prepared foods tend to be especially high in salt.


So think twice before filling up on your favorite fast-food fix. Consider using a salt substitute, such as Dash, if you have high blood pressure or heart failure.

Reduce your saturated fat intake

Slicing your saturated fat intake to no more than 7 percent of your daily calories can cut your risk of heart disease, advises the [USDA](#). If you don't normally read nutrition labels, consider starting today. Take stock of what you're eating and avoid foods that are high in saturated fat.

Instead, you can switch your unhealthy fat intake with [healthy fats](#), such as avocados, olive oil, and eggs.

Drink tea

No magic is needed to brew a cup of green or black tea. According to the [AHA](#) , drinking one to three cups of tea per day may help lower your risk of heart problems. For example, it's linked to lower rates of angina and heart attacks.

Eat dark chocolate

Dark chocolate not only tastes delicious, it also contains heart-healthy flavonoids. These compounds help reduce inflammation and lower your risk of heart disease, suggest scientists in the journal [Nutrients](#).

Eaten in moderation, dark chocolate — not oversweetened milk chocolate — can actually be good for you. The next time you want to indulge your sweet tooth, sink it into a square or two of dark chocolate. No guilt required.

Incorporating exercise into your routine

Move your body throughout the day

No matter how much you weigh, sitting for long periods of time could shorten your lifespan, warn researchers in the [Archives of Internal Medicine](#) ✓ and the [American Heart Association](#) ✓.

Couch potato and desk jockey lifestyles seem to have an unhealthy effect on blood fats and blood sugar. If you work at a desk, remember to take regular breaks to move around. Go for a stroll on your lunch break, and enjoy regular exercise in your leisure time.

Practice yoga

Yoga can help you improve your balance, flexibility, and strength. It can help you relax and relieve stress. As if that's not enough, yoga also has potential to improve heart health.

According to research published in the [Journal of Evidence-Based Complementary & Alternative Medicine](#) ✓, yoga has the potential to reduce one's risk of cardiovascular disease.

Try strength training

Aerobic fitness is key to keeping your heart healthy, but it's not the only type of exercise you should do. It's also important to include regular strength training sessions in your schedule.

The more muscle mass you build, the more calories you burn. That can help you maintain a heart-healthy weight and fitness level.

Try interval training


Start and stop, then start and stop again. During interval training, you alternate bursts of intense physical activity with bouts of lighter activity. The [Mayo Clinic](#) reports that doing so can boost the number of calories you burn while working out.

Try dancing

Whether you prefer a rumba beat or two-step tune, dancing makes for a great heart-healthy workout. Like other forms of aerobic exercise, it raises your heart rate and gets your lungs pumping. It also burns up to 200 calories or more per hour, reports the [Mayo Clinic](#).

Engage in sexual activity

That's right, having sex can be good for your heart. Sexual activity may add more than just pleasure to your life. It may also help lower your blood pressure and risk of heart disease.

Research published in the [American Journal of Cardiology](#)  shows that a lower frequency of sexual activity is associated with higher rates of cardiovascular disease.

Go for a walk

The next time you feel overwhelmed, exasperated, or angry, take a stroll. Even a five-minute walk can help clear your head and lower your stress levels, which is good for your health. Taking a half-hour walk every day is even better for your physical and mental health.

Take the stairs

Exercise is essential for good heart health, so why not sneak it in at every opportunity? Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Park on the far side of the parking lot. Walk to a colleague's desk to talk, instead of emailing them.

Play with your dog or kids at the park, instead of just watching them. Every little bit adds up to better fitness.

Use housework as exercise

Vacuuming or mopping the floors may not be as invigorating as a Body Slam or Zumba class. But these activities and other household chores do get you moving.

They can give your heart a little workout while burning calories, too. Put your favorite music on and add some pep to your step while you complete your weekly chores.

Be a kid

Fitness doesn't have to be boring. Let your inner child take the lead by enjoying an evening of roller skating, bowling, or laser tag. You can have fun while burning calories and giving your heart a workout.


Mental health and heart health

Engage in hobbies

Put your hands to work to help your mind unwind. Engaging in activities such as knitting, sewing, and crocheting can help relieve stress and do your ticker some good. Other relaxing hobbies, such as woodworking, cooking, or completing jigsaw puzzles, may also help take the edge off stressful days.

Laugh out loud

Don't just LOL in emails or Facebook posts. Laugh out loud in your daily life. Whether you like watching funny movies or cracking jokes with your friends, laughter may be good for your heart.

According to the [AHA](#) , research suggests laughing can lower stress hormones, decrease inflammation in your arteries, and raise your levels of [high-density lipoprotein \(HDL\)](#), also known as "good cholesterol."

Manage your stress

A sunny outlook may be good for your heart, as well as your mood. According to the [Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health](#), chronic stress, anxiety, and anger can raise your risk of heart disease and stroke. Learning ways to [manage your stress and anxiety](#) may help you stay healthier for longer.

Know your numbers

Keeping your blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, and triglycerides in check is important for good heart health. Learn the optimal levels for your sex and age group.

Take steps to reach and maintain those levels. And remember to schedule regular check-ups with your doctor. If you want to make your doctor happy, keep good records of your vitals or lab numbers, and bring them to your appointments.

Consider pet therapy

Our pets offer more than good company and unconditional love. They also provide numerous health benefits. Studies reported by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) suggest that owning a pet may help improve your heart and lung function. It may also help lower your chances of dying from heart disease.

Take the scenic route home

Put down your cell phone, forget about the driver who cut you off, and enjoy your ride. Eliminating stress while driving can help lower your blood pressure and stress levels. That's something your cardiovascular system will appreciate.

Takeaway

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If you aren't sure where to begin, speak with a medical professional about your concerns, and they can help create a treatment plan that works for your needs and lifestyle.

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