

3 Keys to Maintaining Heart Health

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Cholesterol, blood pressure, salt and fat – a lot of buzz words get thrown around when people talk about heart health. It can make the topic seem complicated and confusing.

But WWMG Cardiologist Dr. Thomas Richardson says taking care of your heart is actually pretty straightforward. There are really only three factors that make all the difference between heart disease and heart health.

“In studies that look at regions of the world that have very low incidence of heart attacks, certain factors are common: (1) people follow a plant-based diet; (2) they are active in their daily life; and (3) they maintain very tight social groups,” said Dr. Richardson.

Preventing or Managing Heart Disease

“The heart is essentially a muscular pump. When we look at heart health, we look at the function of that pump, the arteries that supply the blood to the heart muscle, and the electrical system that keeps the heart in rhythm” said Richardson. The most common problems that lead to impaired heart function are narrowing of the arteries and high blood pressure.

Atherosclerosis, also called coronary artery disease, narrows the arteries through plaque buildup, resulting in decreased blood flow to the heart. This can lead to a heart attack, which impairs the heart’s ability to function.

High blood pressure is also a factor in heart health because it requires the heart to work harder with each beat. Over time, hypertension thickens the heart muscle, making it less efficient. Fortunately, atherosclerosis and high blood pressure can be influenced by our choices in diet, exercise, and stress management.

For people who have already had a heart attack or been diagnosed with atherosclerosis, making heart-healthy choices is an urgent necessity. But for everyone else, the good news is that incremental change is effective. Every heart-healthy choice you make improves your chances of avoiding a heart attack.

Following a Heart Healthy Diet

Nutrition is a complex science, but the guidelines for a heart healthy diet are simple.

“In our country we have a diet that promotes the development of plaque in the arteries and elevated blood pressure. That’s a diet that is predominantly processed foods, and predominantly animal based,” said Richardson.

“When you look at the data, the only thing that has been shown to reverse atherosclerosis has been moving to a plant-based, low-fat diet. The medications we have aren’t even able to do that,” Richardson said. Although replacing animal fats with whole fruits and vegetables is one of the best things you can do for your diet, Richardson says you don’t necessarily have to become vegan.

Plant-based processed foods aren’t much of an improvement over animal fats. “Doritos are vegan,” he points out. “The more you can eat food in its natural form, the better it is for you. Your body digests whole foods differently. Even moving partway toward that diet

helps. The more you move in that direction, the healthier you will be," he said.

Richardson recommends that people start making changes with breakfast. "People tend to habitually eat the same breakfast every day, so instead of having an Egg McMuffin you can have a bowl of oatmeal with fruit. That's an easy way to improve a third of your meals with one choice."

Recommended reading: *How Not to Die by Michael Greger*

Exercise for Heart Health

Like nutrition, it's easy to get lost in the weeds of research about exercise. But for heart health, Richardson says you just need to move more, and move more often.

The minimum recommendation is 150 minutes spread out over a week. Ideally, you should exercise every day, with a mix of aerobic exercises and strength training. If you like going to the gym, that's great. But Richardson said, "I see people sign up and go to the gym for a few days and then life gets in the way, and it just goes by the wayside. It's more helpful to develop a habit you can sustain."

A consistent five-minute walk after breakfast is more beneficial than giving up after a couple of intense workouts. Just 10-15 minutes with light weights a couple times a week can help maintain heart health as well as quality of life and independence as we age. Once you've established a strong habit, you can build up the duration or intensity.

For those who want to make the most of their time, he does advise, "Brief bursts of high intensity exercise that really gets your heart rate up are a very efficient way to improve your fitness." A few 5-20 second sprints really boost the impact of a 20-minute walk.

"I encourage people to tie exercise to something you look forward to so it's not a chore," said Richardson. For example, reward yourself with your morning coffee after a walk, or take it with you in a thermos.

Stress Management

"It's very difficult to determine exactly how much stress impacts the risk of coronary artery disease," Richardson said. But there is a clear connection.

“We all have to deal with stress. Trying to get rid of it seems futile. So it’s really about how you deal with stress,” said Richardson. Meditation can be helpful, as can exercise. But Richardson said very tight, supportive social groups seem to make the most impact.

While giving relationship advice is outside the scope of a cardiologist’s practice, professional mental health support is an option. And since every step in the right direction has an impact, you might start by sharing a heart-healthy meal with your family or inviting a friend to join you for a walk.

As mentioned above, the 3 most important keys to maintaining heart health are:

- following a plant-based diet
- staying active in your daily life, and
- maintaining tight social groups

If that list seems overwhelming, start with one of these and be consistent and persistent in sticking to the changes you make. Every heart-healthy choice you make improves your chances of avoiding a heart attack.

If you’re concerned about your heart health, or would like personalized guidance changes you should make to your daily regimen, request an appointment with a WWMG Cardiologist today. We’re here to support you.

All, Cardiology

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