

7 PROVEN WAYS TO KEEP YOUR HEART HEALTHY



It's officially a good time to check on your heart health. Each year the American Heart Association (AHA) raises awareness about the importance of cardiovascular fitness. It's easy to learn about your heart health and how to improve it, thanks to the American Heart Association's development of "Life's Simple 7." These behaviors and factors are scientifically proven to have the biggest impact on the heart. "This is kind of like tapping into the fountain of youth," said Dr. Donald Lloyd-Jones, a cardiologist and American Heart Association (AHA) volunteer who chairs the Department of Preventive Medicine at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

Some of Life's Simple 7 are tracked through medical exams. Others can be checked on your own. An online tool from AHA called **My Life Check** can also help.



AHA offers the following guidelines of Life's Simple 7:

1. Get active:

Physical activity every day can greatly improve your overall health and make you feel better. It can reduce the risk for heart disease, stroke and diabetes.

Physical activity can come in many forms and can be inexpensive. **Brisk walking**, for example, is extremely beneficial to your cardiovascular health and costs nothing. Physical activity also can include strength and resistance training.

Doctors suggest that at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity per day five times a week for adults. Children need 60 minutes a day, every day.

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2. Control cholesterol:

Controlling cholesterol can help arteries remain free of blockages. When you have too much "bad cholesterol," known as LDL, it can lead to plaque forming in veins and arteries. That can result in heart disease and stroke.

Try to control cholesterol by exercising and by avoiding or reducing consumption of animal products high in saturated fat, such as beef, pork, cream and butter.

Certain foods may help lower cholesterol: whole-and multi-grain products such as bran and oats; fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel and albacore tuna; and fruits, vegetables and certain nuts such as walnuts and almonds.

The ideal "number" for good, bad and total cholesterol depends on your overall health. **AHA guidelines** recommend talking through those numbers with your doctor to determine whether you need to consider lifestyle changes or medications.

3. Eat better:

A healthy eating plan keeps you energized and helps your body fight diseases.

Fruits and vegetables are part of a nutritious food plan, as are low-fat and fat-free dairy items, whole grains, nuts, beans and legumes, fish, and lean meats. Try to reduce consuming sodium, saturated fats and added sugars.

It may help to keep a food diary to keep track of the times and foods you eat and approximate portion size. Planning your dining each week also can help you eat healthier.

4. Manage blood pressure:

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, can strain the heart, arteries and kidneys, and can increase the risk of heart disease, stroke and other major health problems.

The ideal blood pressure reading is no more than 120 for the top, or systolic, number and no more than 80 for the diastolic, or bottom, number. Some grocery stores and drug stores offer blood pressure reader machines, allowing for free regular checks.

Blood pressure can also be **measured at home**, which you may want to consider if you have continually elevated blood pressure. The AHA offers **advice** on what type of home device to buy and how to measure blood pressure, but be sure to discuss this with your health care provider. If you'd rather not spend the money and if it's convenient, consider dropping by a pharmacy or store that offers free blood pressure readings instead.

You can help control your blood pressure by eating a heart-healthy diet, reducing sodium, exercising and maintaining a healthy weight. Managing stress, limiting alcohol and avoiding tobacco smoke can help, too.

Medication can assist in managing blood pressure if a doctor determines it's needed.

5. Lose weight:

Reducing weight can reduce the risk for heart disease. Too much fat, especially at the waist, increases the risk for high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and diabetes. Calculating your **BMI**, or body mass index, helps determine if you should lose weight.

It's recommended that your BMI remain below 25. Even losing five to 10 pounds can reduce blood pressure.

If you do embark on an eating plan to lose weight, the AHA and other health organizations support the **DASH diet**, which stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension. DASH emphasizes foods low in saturated fat, total fat, cholesterol and salt. It calls for eating fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy foods, whole grains, poultry, fish and nuts.

6. Reduce blood sugar:

Glucose, or blood sugar, is generated by food and used for the body's energy. But a high blood sugar level could mean diabetes or prediabetes. Diabetes can increase the risk for heart disease and stroke.

To be in the healthy range, your fasting blood sugar level should be below 100. To reduce blood sugar, decrease consumption of added sugars, which can be found in sugar-sweetened beverages, candy and desserts. Regular physical activity can also help reduce blood sugar levels. If prescribed by your doctor, taking medication or insulin may be necessary.

In addition to measuring blood sugar at annual physical exams, there are several types of home monitors for self-testing. Some are available at a very reasonable price at discount stores.

7. Don't smoke:

If you're going to start with only one of Life's Simple 7, it's a good idea to make it this one. Quitting smoking can result in immediate benefits.

Smoking causes damage throughout the circulatory system. It can lead to hardened arteries; reduce "good cholesterol," known as HDL; and diminish lung capacity, making it more difficult to engage in physical activity.

Stopping smoking lowers the risk of blood clots, heart attacks and strokes. It can also mean less lung damage and lower risk of cancer. The AHA offers resources to help you stop on its **Quit Smoking website**.

Whether quitting smoking or taking other steps in "Life's Simple 7," what's most important is to do something, Lloyd-Jones said.

"Small changes can have a big impact," he said.

