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Days to a Healthier Heart

February may be a month for romance, but it's also a time for you to focus on loving yourself--and your heart. During National Heart Month, we'll help you focus on one small thing that you can do each day to lower your risk of heart disease and improve your quality of life. Share this valentine with your friends and loved ones to show them how much you care!



February

1 **Get a checkup.** Your doctor doesn't just treat disease. She also offers screenings and preventive care. Knowing your health status (and risk) will help make lifestyle changes in areas that need improvement.

2 Don't smoke. Smoking damages more than your lungs. It hardens the arteries, raises blood pressure, and causes an irregular heartbeat. Find a smoking cessation program in your area to kick the habit.

3 Monitor your cholesterol intake. Your body needs cholesterol, which is found in animal foods (meat, dairy, eggs), but too much can contribute to disease. Keep your intake under 300 milligrams daily.



4 **Get moving.** Physical activity is an important part of a heart-healthy routine. It can also help you control your weight, lower your blood pressure, and improve your cholesterol levels. Shoot for at least 30 minutes of exercise each day.

5 Boost your HDL. You want these "healthy" cholesterol levels to be high--at least 60 mg/dL--to protect your heart. Do this by exercising regularly and enjoying healthy fats found in nuts, olive oil, fish and flaxseed.

6 **Slow down.** Chronic stress exposes your body to elevated levels of stress hormones that can elevate blood pressure and contribute to weight gain. Meditation, yoga, journaling, talk therapy, and exercising can all help.



7 Go nuts! Almonds, cashews, flaxseeds, hazelnuts, macadamia nuts, pecans, peanuts, pistachios, sesame seeds, and walnuts all contain healthy fats. Enjoy a handful 3-5 times a week for a healthier heart.

8 Pump iron. Strength training benefits more than your muscles. It can also lower blood pressure, strengthen the heart, and help it beat more efficiently. Aim for 2-3 strength training sessions each week.

9 **Avoid trans fats.** Consuming even a tiny amount of trans fat can greatly increase your risk of heart disease. Found in foods that contain "partially hydrogenated" oil as an ingredient, trans fat is the world's unhealthiest fat!



10 Lose weight. Dropping just 10% of your body weight (if you are overweight) can significantly improve your blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and overall heart health.

11 Sip green tea. Iced or hot green tea is packed with antioxidants that prevent plaque from forming on artery walls, relax the blood vessels, and reduce the risk of heart disease. Brew and enjoy 1-2 cups each day.

12 Consider aspirin therapy. Taking baby aspirin (81 mg) can help reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke by preventing blood clots. Since it's not safe for everyone, talk to your doctor first.

13 Fill up with fiber. Soluble fiber (found in oats, rice, bran, barley, dried beans, and apples) can help lower your cholesterol levels, which improves your heart health. Aim for 25-35 grams of fiber each day.

14 Satisfy your sweet tooth this Valentine's Day. Studies show that dark chocolate helps prevent heart disease. Milk chocolate doesn't offer the same benefits, so look for at least 60-70% dark chocolate varieties.

15 Crack up! Recent studies are showing that laughing may protect your heart by improving circulation and blood flow. Tell a joke, watch a comedy, or just laugh out loud. After all, heart health is serious business!

16 Practice yoga. Research shows that yoga, like meditation, can reduce blood pressure, improve arterial elasticity, regulate heart rhythm, and increase the heart's efficiency. Try a class or video 1-3 times per week.

17 Limit saturated fat. Foods to avoid include: bacon, beef, butter, full-fat dairy, coconut oil, ice cream, lard, palm oil, and pork. Read food labels, aiming for less than 15-25 grams of saturated fat daily.

18 **Choose whole grains.** Foods like brown rice, oats, whole wheat and barley are packed with fiber, antioxidants, and other nutrients. A diet rich in whole grains can help lower cholesterol and improve heart health.



19 Get screened. After age 20, you should get your cholesterol levels tested every five years. Discuss your results with your health care provider for recommendations.

20 Catch some Zzz's. If you average less than 8 hours of sleep a night, you could be putting your heart at risk. Getting 8 hours of restful sleep is an important part of a heart-healthy lifestyle.

21 Limit alcohol. Recent headlines about the benefits of alcohol are controversial since alcohol can cause other health problems. If you don't drink, don't start. If you do, limit alcohol to one drink daily.



22 Hold the salt. Consuming too much sodium can elevate blood pressure, increasing your heart disease risk. Look for low-sodium foods and try to limit your sodium intake to less than 2,300 mg daily.

23 Know your family history. Certain health risks are partly genetic. For example, if your father had a heart attack at a young age, you should start preventive care and screenings sooner yourself.

24 Cook at home. Homemade meals are usually lower in fat, salt, and cholesterol and higher in fiber and nutrients. When you do the cooking, you control the ingredients and the cooking method.

25 Move more. Every bit of activity you do can help you strengthen your heart and maintain your weight. Find opportunities for fitness by taking the stairs, parking further away, doing yard work and more.

26 Breathe. Slow, deep breaths can help conquer stress and lower blood pressure. With your eyes closed, practice inhaling deeply into the belly and exhaling slowly. Try this several times a day.

27 Go fish. Fish like salmon, tuna and halibut are rich in Omega-3 fatty acids, which promote heart health. Six to eight ounces of baked or broiled fish each week will do your body good!

28 It's never too late to start a healthy lifestyle. By implementing small lifestyle changes like these each day, you can improve your heart health and quality of life. The important thing is to stick with it.

29 **Take a hike.** Because it's leap year, you get an extra day to work on your heart's health! Go for a walk today--even if you only have 10 minutes. Short bursts of light activity strengthen your heart, just like longer, intense workouts do. Take advantage of this extra day and your heart will thank you!



This general information is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always consult your health care provider before starting any nutrition or fitness program, and to discuss any concerns or questions.