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Heart-Healthy Living

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Overview



Heart disease is a leading cause of death in the United States for both men and women. But you can do a lot to protect your heart and stay healthy.

Heart-healthy living involves understanding your risk, making choices, and taking steps to reduce your chances of getting heart disease, including [coronary heart disease](#), the most common type. Coronary and other types of heart disease cause heart attacks, but by taking preventive measures, you can lower your risk of developing heart disease and also improve your overall health and well-being.

Learn more about living a heart-healthy lifestyle, our role in research and clinical trials to improve health, and where to find more information.

See also

[Information for Health Professionals](#)

Get Your Blood Pressure and Cholesterol Checked

Two of the major risk factors for heart disease are [high blood pressure](#) and [high blood cholesterol](#). If either of these numbers is high, work with your doctor to get it to a healthy range.

High blood pressure

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the walls of your arteries as your heart pumps blood. If this pressure rises and stays high over time, it can damage your heart and your blood vessels and lead to plaque buildup.

Most adults should have their blood pressure checked at least once a year. If you have high blood pressure, you will likely need to be checked more often. Talk with your doctor about how often you should have your blood pressure checked.

Your doctor will measure your blood pressure to see if it is higher than is recommended. The reading is made up of two numbers, with the systolic number above the diastolic number. These numbers are measures of pressure in millimeters of mercury (mm Hg). Learn more about getting your blood pressure measured in this video.

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This video shows steps to getting your blood pressure measured. Avoid caffeine or tobacco 30 minutes before having it taken and rest for at least 5 minutes before. Then right before, take a breath and relax. Afterward, ask your doctor what your numbers mean and write them down.

Your blood pressure is considered high when you have consistent systolic readings of 140 mm Hg or higher or diastolic readings of 90 mm Hg or higher. Based on research, your doctor may also consider you to have high blood pressure if you are an adult or child age 13 or older who has consistent systolic readings of 130 to 139 mm Hg or diastolic readings of 80 to 89 mm Hg and you have other risk factors for heart disease.

If your blood pressure is high, your doctor will suggest lifestyle changes and may prescribe medicines. Learn more about high blood pressure. You can track your progress with our [Tracking Your Numbers worksheet](#) and bring it with you whenever you have your blood pressure taken.

High blood cholesterol

High blood cholesterol is a condition in which your blood has unhealthy levels of cholesterol—a waxy, fat-like substance.

Many factors affect your cholesterol levels. For example, age, sex, eating patterns, and physical activity level can affect your cholesterol levels. Children also can have unhealthy cholesterol levels, especially if they're

overweight or their parents have high blood cholesterol.

A blood test can show whether your cholesterol levels are healthy. Talk with your doctor about having your cholesterol tested and how often you need it tested. Your cholesterol numbers will include total cholesterol, “bad” [LDL cholesterol](#) and “good” [HDL cholesterol](#) , and triglycerides. Ask your doctor what your numbers mean for you.

If you have unhealthy cholesterol levels, your doctor may suggest the lifestyle changes discussed in this topic. If heart-healthy lifestyle changes alone are not enough, your doctor may prescribe a statin or other medicine to help manage your cholesterol levels.

Choose Heart-Healthy Foods

Heart-healthy eating involves choosing certain foods, such as fruits and vegetables, while limiting others, such as saturated and *trans* fats and added sugars.

Your doctor may recommend the heart-healthy [Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension \(DASH\) eating plan](#) because it has been proven to lower [high blood pressure](#) and “bad” LDL cholesterol in the blood. Visit our [Delicious Heart-Healthy Eating page](#) for recipes, cooking tips, and more.

Foods to eat

The following foods are the foundation of a heart-healthy eating plan.

- **Vegetables** such as leafy greens (spinach, collard greens, kale, cabbage), broccoli, and carrots
- **Fruits** such as apples, bananas, oranges, pears, grapes, and prunes
- **Whole grains** such as plain oatmeal, brown rice, and whole-grain bread or tortillas
- **Fat-free or low-fat dairy** foods such as milk, cheese, or yogurt

- **Protein-rich foods:**
 - **Fish** high in omega-3 fatty acids (salmon, tuna, and trout)
 - **Lean meats** such as 95% lean ground beef or pork tenderloin or skinless chicken or turkey
 - **Eggs**
 - **Nuts, seeds, and soy products** (tofu)
 - **Legumes** such as kidney beans, lentils, chickpeas, black-eyed peas, and lima beans
- **Oils and foods high in monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats:**
 - Canola, corn, olive, safflower, sesame, sunflower, and soybean oils (not coconut or palm oil)
 - Nuts such as walnuts, almonds, and pine nuts
 - Nut and seed butters
 - Salmon and trout
 - Seeds (sesame, sunflower, pumpkin, or flax)
 - Avocados
 - Tofu

Foods to limit

A heart-healthy eating plan limits sodium (salt), saturated and *trans* fats, added sugars, and alcohol. Understanding nutrition labels can help you choose healthier foods. Visit [How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label](#) from the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) to learn more.

Limit sodium

Adults and children over age 14 should eat less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium a day. Children younger than age 14 may need to eat even less sodium each day based on their sex and age. If you have high blood pressure, you may need to limit sodium even more. Talk to your doctor or healthcare provider about what amount of sodium is right for you or your child.

Try these shopping and cooking tips to help you choose and prepare foods that are lower in sodium:

- Read food labels and choose products that have less sodium for the same serving size.
- Choose low-sodium, reduced-sodium, or no-salt-added products.
- Choose fresh, frozen, or no-salt-added foods instead of pre-seasoned, sauce-marinated, brined, or processed meats, poultry, and vegetables.
- Eat at home more often so you can cook food from scratch, which will allow you to control the amount of sodium in your meals.
- Flavor foods with herbs and spices instead of salt.
- When cooking, limit your use of premade sauces, mixes, and instant products such as rice, noodles, and ready-made pasta.

For more ways to limit your sodium, visit [Living With the DASH Eating Plan](#) or print this handout, [Tips to Reduce Salt and Sodium](#).

Limit saturated fats

Saturated or “bad” fats come from animal sources such as butter, cheese, and fatty meats and should make up less than 10% of your daily calories. Read food labels and choose foods that are lower in these fats and higher in unsaturated fats. Unsaturated fats are also known as “good” fats and are found in vegetable oils and nuts.

Limit saturated fats by:

- **Eating leaner, lower-fat, and skinless meats** instead of fatty cuts of meat and chicken with skin.
- **Consuming lower-fat dairy products** instead of whole-milk.
- **Using certain vegetable oils** (such as olive and canola oil) instead of butter, lard, and coconut and palm oils.

Learn more about [limiting saturated fat from the U.S. Food & Drug Administration](#).

Limit *trans* fats

Limit *trans* fats as much as possible by:

- **Limiting foods high in *trans* fats.** This includes foods made with

[partially hydrogenated](#) oils such as some desserts, microwave popcorn, frozen pizza, stick margarines, and coffee creamers.

- **Reading the nutrition labels** and choosing foods that do not contain *trans* fats.

Dairy products and meats naturally contain very small amounts of *trans* fats. You do not need to avoid these foods because they have other important nutrients.

Limit added sugars

You should limit the amount of calories you get each day from added sugars. This will help you choose nutrient-rich foods and stay within your daily calorie limit.

Some foods, such as fruit, contain natural sugars. Added sugars do not occur naturally in foods but instead are used to sweeten foods and drinks. They include brown sugar, corn syrup, dextrose, fructose, glucose, high-fructose corn syrup, raw sugar, and sucrose.

In the United States, sweetened drinks, snacks, and sweets are the major sources of added sugars.

- **Sweetened drinks** include soft drinks or sodas, fruit drinks, sweetened coffee and tea, energy drinks, alcoholic drinks, and flavored waters. Sweetened drinks account for about half of all added sugars consumed.
- **Snacks and sweets** include grain-based desserts such as cakes, pies, cookies, brownies, doughnuts; dairy desserts such as ice cream, frozen desserts, and pudding; candies; sugars; jams; syrups; and sweet toppings.

Lower how much sugar you eat or drink by:

- Choosing drinks without added sugar such as water, low-fat or fat-free milk, or 100% vegetable juice.
- Choosing unsweetened foods for snacks or dessert.
- Eating sweetened drinks, snacks, and desserts less often and in

smaller amounts.

Limit alcohol

Talk to your doctor about how much alcohol you drink. Your doctor may recommend that you reduce the amount of alcohol you drink or that you stop drinking alcohol. Alcohol can:

- Add calories to your daily diet and possibly cause you to gain weight.
- Raise your blood pressure and levels of triglyceride fats in your blood.
- Contribute to or worsen heart failure in some people, such as some people who have [cardiomyopathy](#).
- Raise your risk of other diseases such as cancer.

If you do not drink, you should not start. You should not drink if you are pregnant, are under the age of 21, taking certain medicines, or if you have certain medical conditions, including [heart failure](#).

Read the *2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* to learn about [what is considered one alcoholic drink and how calories vary by drink](#).

How much should you eat?

You should eat the right amount of calories for your body, which will vary based on your sex, age, and physical activity level. Remember that some healthy foods, including oils and dairy, can still have a lot of calories. Some fruits can have a lot of natural sugar, especially when they are dried. Develop a personalized food plan at [Get Your MyPlate Plan](#).

You can visit the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' and U.S. Department of Agriculture's [2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) for more information about healthy eating and to read about their recommendations for the following healthy eating patterns.

- [Healthy U.S.-style eating pattern](#)

- [Healthy Mediterranean-style eating pattern](#)
- [Healthy vegetarian eating pattern](#)

Aim for a Healthy Weight

A healthy weight for adults is usually when the body mass index (BMI) is between 18.5 and 24.9. To figure out your BMI, use our online [BMI calculator](#) and compare your BMI with the following table. You can also download the BMI calculator app for [iPhone](#) and [Android](#).

Weight Category	Body Mass Index
Underweight	Below 18.5
Healthy weight	18.5 to 24.9
Overweight	25 to 29.9
Obese	30 or above

Body mass index (BMI) is used to determine whether you are at a healthy weight. Adults are underweight if their BMI is below 18.5 and are at a healthy weight if their BMI is 18.5 to 24.9. Adults are overweight if their BMI is 25 to 29.9 and have obesity if their BMI is 30 or above.

Always talk to your doctor or healthcare provider about what BMI is right for you. Talk to your child's doctor to determine whether your growing child has a healthy weight, because his or her BMI should be compared to growth charts specific for your child's age and sex. Following a [heart-healthy eating](#) plan and being [physically active](#) are some ways to help you achieve and maintain a healthy weight. For more information, visit [Aim for a Healthy Weight](#).

Visit our [Overweight and Obesity](#) Health Topic for more information and watch our video below.

Obesity: The little things



This video shows how little things we do each day can add up and lead to weight gain. Gaining 10 pounds adds more than 30 pounds of force to your knees, which can cause aches and pains. Taking action by eating healthy and getting physical activity can lower the risk of developing serious health problems. And you can do more of the things you enjoy.

Health risks of overweight or obesity

The more body fat that you have and the more you weigh, the more likely you are to develop heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, breathing problems, and certain cancers.

Measuring waist circumference

If most of your fat is around your waist rather than at your hips, you are at a higher risk for heart disease and type 2 diabetes. This risk may be high with a waist circumference that is more than 35 inches for women or more than 40 inches for men.

To correctly measure your waist circumference, stand and place a tape measure around your middle, just above your hipbones. Measure your waist just after you breathe out.

Benefits of maintaining a healthy weight

If you have been diagnosed with overweight or obesity, it's important to follow your doctor's recommendations for losing weight. Health professionals recommend losing 5% to 10% of your initial weight over the course of about 6 months. Even before you reach this goal, a loss of just 3% to 5% of your current weight can lower triglycerides and glucose levels in your blood, as well as your risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Losing more than 3% to 5% of your weight can improve blood pressure readings, lower "bad" LDL cholesterol, and increase "good" HDL cholesterol.

Manage Stress

Research suggests that an emotionally upsetting event, particularly one involving anger, can serve as a trigger for a heart attack or angina in some people. Stress can contribute to high blood pressure and other heart disease risk factors. Some of the ways people cope with stress—drinking alcohol, using other substances, smoking, or overeating—are not healthy ways to manage stress.

Learning how to manage stress and cope with problems can improve your mental and physical health. Consider healthy stress-reducing activities such as:

- Talking to a professional counselor
- Participating in a stress management program
- Practicing meditation
- Being physically active
- Trying [relaxation techniques](#)
- Talking with friends, family, and community or religious support systems

Small Steps for the Heart, #FromTheHeart: De-stress with De...



This video shows small steps you can take to reduce stress. Sit in a comfortable place and breathe in slowly through your nose, letting your stomach expand fully. Breathe out slowly through your mouth (or nose, if that feels more natural). Try to practice this once or twice a day for 10 to 20 minutes.

Ask your doctor what kinds of stress management are safe for you.

Get Regular Physical Activity

Regular physical activity can:

- Help you lose excess weight
- Improve physical fitness
- Lower many heart disease risk factors such as “bad” LDL cholesterol levels, increase “good” HDL cholesterol levels, and manage high blood pressure
- Lower stress and improve your mental health
- Lower your risk for other conditions such as type 2 diabetes, depression, and cancer

Talk with your doctor before you start a new exercise plan. Discuss how much and what types of physical activity are safe for you. Even modest

amounts of physical activity are good for your health. Get inspired from this video.



This video shows small changes you can make to move more throughout the day. These include taking the stairs, parking farther away from your destination, and getting up and taking breaks from your computer. You can build up to activity that gets your heart beating faster and eventually aim to move for at least 2 hours and 30 minutes each week. If you are busy, break the activity up into smaller chunks of time—it all adds up. Do activities that are fun, such as jumping rope, taking brisk walks, and dancing.

Aerobic exercise benefits your lungs the most. This is any exercise in which your heart beats faster and you use more oxygen than usual, such as brisk walking, running, biking, and swimming.

The more active you are, the more you will benefit. Participate in aerobic exercise for at least a few minutes at a time throughout the week. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#) recommends that **each week, adults get at least:**

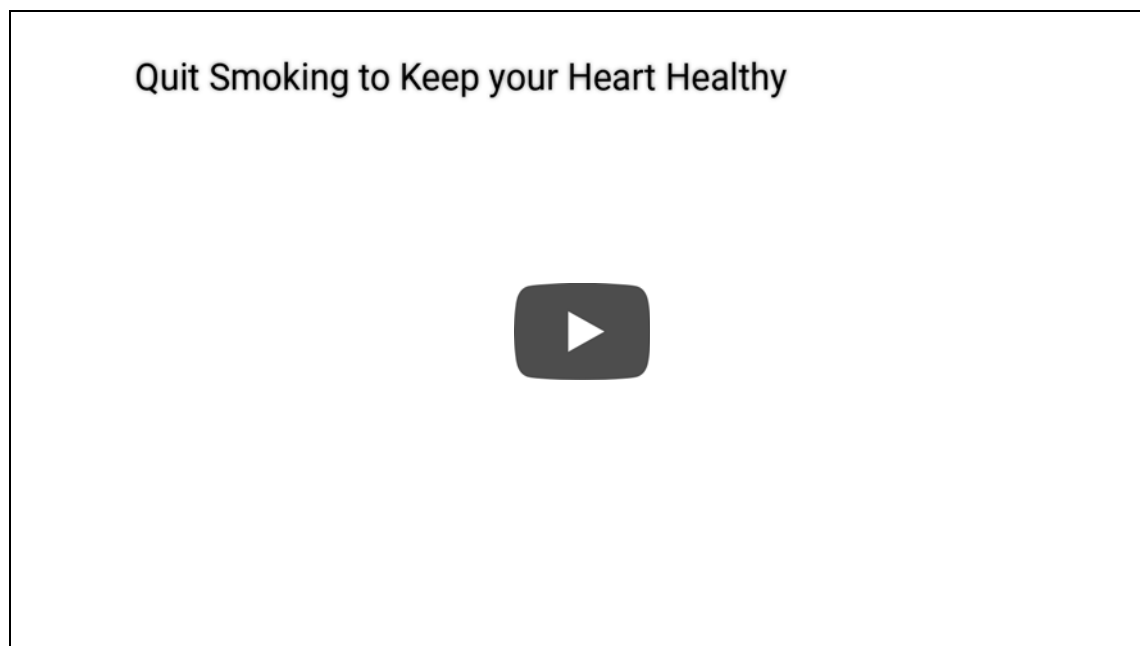
- 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity (for example, 30 minutes 5 days a week), or
- 1 hour and 15 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity (for example, 25 minutes 3 days a week), or
- A combination of both moderate-intensity and vigorous-intensity activity.

Another way you can begin to increase your activity level is by reducing how long you sit at a given time. Breaking up how long you sit will benefit your overall health.

Learn more about physical activity in our [Physical Activity and Your Heart](#) Health Topic.

Quit Smoking

If you smoke, quit. Smoking can raise your risk of [heart disease](#) and [heart attack](#) and worsen other heart disease risk factors. Talk with your doctor about programs and products that can help you quit smoking. Also, try to avoid secondhand smoke. Learn more in our video.



This video shows small steps to take to help you quit smoking. Set a quit date, get support from family and friends, and stay busy and active. Avoid things like caffeine that trigger cravings, enjoy healthy meals and snacks, and track your progress.

If you have trouble quitting smoking on your own, consider joining a support group. Many hospitals, workplaces, and community groups offer classes to help people quit smoking.

Learn more about quitting smoking in our [Smoking and Your Heart](#)

Health Topic and visit [Your Guide to a Healthy Heart](#). For free help and support to quit smoking, you can call the National Cancer Institute's Smoking Quitline at 1-877-44U-QUIT (1-877-448-7848).

Talk to your doctor if you vape. There is scientific evidence that nicotine and flavorings found in vaping products can damage your heart and lungs.

Get Enough Good-Quality Sleep

Sleep plays a vital role in good health and well-being throughout your life. During sleep, your body is working to support healthy brain function and maintain your physical health. Not getting enough sleep or good-quality sleep over time can raise your risk for chronic health problems. The amount of sleep you need each day will change over the course of your life. This table reflects recent American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) recommendations that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has endorsed.

Age	Recommended Hours of Sleep a Day
Babies 4-12 months	12-16 (including naps)
Children 1-2 years	11-14 (including naps)
Children 3-5 years	10-13 (including naps)

Age	Recommended Hours of Sleep a Day
Children 6-12 years	9-12
Teens 13-18 years	8-10
Adults 18 years or older	7-9

Sleep and heart health

Sleep helps heal and repair your heart and blood vessels. It also helps:

- Maintain a healthy balance of the hormones that make you feel hungry or full
- Support healthy growth and development
- Support a healthy immune system

Over time, not getting enough quality sleep, called sleep deficiency, can raise your risk of [heart disease](#), [obesity](#), [high blood pressure](#), diabetes, and [stroke](#). Get inspired with this video.

Get Enough Sleep to Protect Your Heart Health!



This video shows how binge-watching TV in bed may be preventing you from getting the 7 to 9 hours of sleep a night you need to keep your heart healthy.

How to sleep better

You can take steps to improve your sleep habits. First, make sure that you allow yourself enough time to sleep. Learn strategies for getting enough sleep in the [Sleep Deprivation and Deficiency](#) Health Topic.

It may help to:

- Spend time outside every day, if possible, and be physically active.
- Avoid nicotine and caffeine.
- Avoid heavy or large meals within a couple hours of bedtime. Also, avoid alcoholic drinks before bed.
- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
- Use the hour before bed for quiet time. Avoid exercise and bright light.
- Take a hot bath or use relaxation techniques before bed.
- Keep your bedroom quiet, cool, and dark.

For more information about healthy sleep habits, visit [Your Guide to Healthy Sleep](#).

