

Heart Health for Valentine's Day

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For nearly 2,400 Americans last year, Valentine's Day was not celebrated with flowers or chocolate. According to the National Center for Health Statistics and the American Heart Association, one American dies every 37 seconds of cardio-vascular disease, or 2,400 people each day, claiming about as many lives each year as cancer, chronic lower respiratory diseases, accidents and diabetes mellitus combined. While there are certain risk factors for heart disease over which you have no control, you DO have control over the most common factors - obesity, high blood fats or blood pressure, smoking and physical inactivity.

Being obese or overweight makes your heart work harder and increases your risk of high blood pressure, diabetes and high blood fats. If you are a woman with a waist size greater than 35 inches, or man with a waist size greater than 40 inches, you need to make some lifestyle changes to reduce your weight. Increase physical activity, reduce daily calories, focus on grains, vegetables, fruits, low-fat dairy, lean meat or protein, reduce added fats and high sugar foods. Losing just 10 to 20 pounds can improve blood pressure, blood sugar control and blood fats.

Healthy cholesterol levels are an important part of reducing your risk for heart disease. Have your levels of blood fats checked every year after age twenty, or more often if you have high levels or other risk factors for heart disease. High blood levels of total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol ("lousy" cholesterol) and triglycerides, plus low blood levels of HDL cholesterol ("healthy" cholesterol) all contribute to heart disease. Keep your blood fats at desirable levels by reducing saturated fats, trans fats, and cholesterol, maintaining a healthy weight and being physically active.

High blood pressure can damage your arteries, causing them to narrow and forcing the heart to work harder to make blood flow. The healthiest blood pressure reading for most people is 120/80 or lower. If either or both of these numbers are higher than desirable you are at an increased risk for having a stroke or heart attack. Control blood pressure by reducing salt intake, losing weight, getting regular exercise and eating a healthy diet that includes plenty of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and low-fat dairy foods. Have your blood pressure checked regularly and take your medication if prescribed by your doctor.

Smoking can raise blood pressure, cause arteries to narrow and make blood more likely to clot and cause a heart attack. Consider seeking help from a stop-smoking program and/or try nicotine patches or nicotine gum or ask your health care provider for information to help you quit.

Daily exercise is probably the easiest and least expensive way to help prevent heart disease. Aim to be active at least 30 minutes most days of the week for a fit heart. Start slowly if you are not currently active and check with your doctor before starting an exercise program if you have not been active for a long time, are over 55, and/or currently have any health problems.

Maintaining a healthy weight, reducing blood fats and blood pressure, quitting smoking and being physical active will help you lower your risk for heart disease and stroke.

Join us for our lunchtime nutrition series at the Oconee County Library:

February 19: Reducing Your Risk of Heart Disease

March 19: Calcium, Bone Health, and Osteoporosis

April 16: What is Diabetes?

For more information about family and consumer sciences topics, contact the Oconee County Cooperative Extension Office at (706) 769-3946 or stop by our office located behind the Oconee County Courthouse.