

How to maintain a **HEALTHY HEART**



A healthy lifestyle is the key to maintaining a healthy heart. The heart is a vital muscle that delivers blood, which is rich in oxygen and nutrients throughout the body, and—just like any muscle—it needs to be well maintained and kept as healthy as possible. Therefore, recognise that maintaining a healthy heart means cutting out as many of the high-risk habits in your life as possible.

This is not ‘by the way’ but real life saving information. Cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) are the leading cause of death globally, taking an estimated 17.9 million lives each year and it is estimated that around 110 million men and 80 million women have heart disease.

Stop all forms of tobacco use

Using tobacco increases your risk of heart damage. Both tobacco and nicotine contain many chemicals that cause harm to your blood vessels and heart, and this results in atherosclerosis, which is a plaque build-up of cholesterol, fat and calcium in your vessels that can cause your arteries to narrow or block, decreasing blood flow.

- The carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke has also been linked to mortality and morbidity. It interferes with oxygen, so your heart is pressured into supplying additional oxygen to compensate. The tightening of the blood vessels, partnered by the performance stress on the heart can both result in a heart attack. The only way to stop this burden on your heart and strive for a healthier heart is to stop smoking.



Incorporate exercise into your daily routine

- Exercise is one of the best ways to make any muscle stronger. The same is true for your heart. Here is what the South African Heart Foundation recommends:
- Health benefits occur with at least 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity physical activity, but additional benefits occur with more physical activity.
- Aim for a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity per week, which can be spread over the week however you like. E.g. 30 minutes 5 days per week.

OR

- At least 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity per week e.g. 25 minutes 3 days per week.

AND

- Muscle-strengthening activity at least 2 or more days per week for additional health benefits.

Maintain a healthy weight

Increased weight causes your body to require more effort from your heart to maintain a baseline resting level of pressure and flow. This continual strain on your heart can tax it and result in serious issues in the future. Exercise and a healthy diet will help you lose the weight that is putting a strain on your heart. Dangerous cardiac issues that arise from being overweight include:

- **Coronary heart disease (atherosclerosis)** - This condition arises from plaque build-up inside the arteries that serve your heart. Plaques can narrow your arteries as they grow and decrease the amount of blood flow, reducing the amount of oxygen that can



be supplied to your body. Your heart must work harder to push blood through the narrowed channels, which can cause angina (chest pain from oxygen deprivation) or even a heart attack. In addition, these plaques can break off and cause sudden blockages in smaller arteries which supply vital organs like the brain, kidneys and heart itself.

- **High blood pressure** - If your heart has to pump harder to get the appropriate amount of oxygen and nutrients through your body, the vessels and your heart can become damaged over time. Your risk of high blood pressure is significantly greater when you are obese or overweight.
- **Stroke** - If a plaque that has developed in your arteries ruptures, the plaque can cause a blood clot to form. If the clot forms in close proximity to your brain, your brain can become deprived of blood and oxygen, resulting in a stroke



Make a habit of getting regular screenings of your blood pressure and cholesterol levels

Doing so will keep you informed of your heart's health and allow you to take action before anything serious develops.

- **Blood pressure screenings** - You should check your blood pressure every two years. If your blood pressure is above 120/80, then your doctor will likely recommend you have your pressure checked every year (or more depending on how high the reading is or if you have kidney problems, heart disease, etc.) If your blood pressure is above 140/90 and your doctor is not aware, it is important that you contact your doctor as soon as possible.



- **Cholesterol Screening** - All men above the age of 34 should be screened every five years. Your doctor will refer you to the lab to draw blood samples and have them tested for cholesterol levels. If you have any risk factors that could make you more likely to have high cholesterol, it is recommended that you be screened as early as 20 years of age. Risk factors may include immediate family history, diabetes, or prior heart disease. Depending on a regular workup, your doctor may request that you are screened more often.

Avoid too much stress

Stress can play a role in your heart health. Increased stress releases cortisol and adrenaline, which elevates blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Stress-related behaviours can also negatively affect your health, causing you to smoke more, drink more, overeat, and be physically inactive. All these behaviours will contribute negatively to your heart health.

- **Exercise, diet, and abstinence from smoking and coffee can help to reduce stress.** You should consider these practices in your life particularly when you are stressed.



Manage your mental health

Certain mental health conditions can lead to detrimental behaviours for your heart health. These include depression and anxiety disorders, which include disorders such as bipolar disorder and over compulsive disorder (OCD). These behaviours can present with symptoms of excessive eating, decreased eating, apathy, physical inactivity, stress, elevated blood pressure, and many other symptoms that negatively impact your heart.

- If you are diagnosed with any mental health condition or believe that you may be suffering from one, be sure to visit your doctor as soon as possible. Only your doctor can effectively treat your mental health condition, as well as determine the effect it may have on the rest of your physical health.



Eat a healthy diet

Opt for a diet that avoids saturated and trans-fat foods, such as red meat, deep-fried fast foods and processed foods. You should also avoid foods that are high in salt and cholesterol. Fish that contains omega-3 fatty acids, such as mackerel and salmon, can reduce risk of a heart problem. The South African Heart Foundation recommends that your diet consist mainly of the following:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Whole grains
- Low-fat dairy products
- Poultry
- Nuts
- Fish



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Avoid foods that are bad for your heart

You should always avoid foods high in saturated fats, trans-fats, high-fructose corn syrup, sugar, and cholesterol. These include red meat, fast food, fried food, chips, sodas, excessive butter, etc.

Most people do know when they are eating unhealthy foods. Use your best judgment and common sense, and take note of nutrition labels, which show daily recommended values.



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Limit alcohol to a healthy amount

Alcohol can damage the heart by contributing to high blood pressure, stroke, and obesity if not consumed in moderation.

Additionally, alcohol can lead to increased levels of triglycerides. These are a specific class of fats that can cause conditions such as pancreatitis. Prolonged alcoholic drinking can lead to irreversible pancreatic damage (chronic pancreatitis).

Source

https://heartfoundation.co.za/get_active_accordion/how-much-exercise-do-i-need

<https://www.wikihow.health/Maintain-a-Healthy-Heart>



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