
Tips for Cardiovascular Health

Your diet and lifestyle can influence your risk of high blood pressure and many heart diseases (e.g. congestive heart failure, peripheral and coronary artery disease, etc.), as well as your risk of heart attack and stroke.

Limit sodium intake. A diet high in sodium (salt) can cause your body to retain water, forcing your heart to work harder to pump this extra water.

Sources of high sodium foods:

- Canned Foods
- Boxed Foods
- TV Dinners
- Fast Food/ Restaurants
- Snack Cakes/ Packaged desserts

Tips to Limit Sodium:

- Use salt-free alternatives such as garlic powder, herbal seasoning blends, and fresh herbs or spices.
- Choose unseasoned fresh or frozen meats instead of processed.
- Choose fresh or frozen vegetables instead of canned. Rinse canned foods such as beans and vegetables in order to reduce salt content.
- Avoid canned soups and other canned foods.
- Check the label and choose lower sodium options.
- Fast food and sit-down restaurants use a lot of salt to season their foods. Try to limit meals eaten out. Ask restaurants to prepare food without salt.
- Note: If your diet consists of mostly whole foods, and you limit processed foods, sodium is typically not an issue.

Fluid: Limit fluid intake if recommended by your doctor. Sometimes your body will retain too much fluid if you drink too much liquid. Discuss with your doctor how often you should weigh yourself and if you should keep a record of your daily fluid intake.

Medications: Take your pills at the same time every day and do not skip a dose. Ask your pharmacist or doctor about the possible side effects of your medication including over-the-counter medication, and if they need to be taken with food.

Smoking: Smoking narrows and hardens your blood vessels and reduces the amount of oxygen in your blood. Tobacco use also introduces many inflammatory, and carcinogenic compounds, to the body. The VA has a smoking cessation clinic, ask your doctor for more information.

Eat some fresh or frozen vegetables: Non-starchy vegetables provide a potent source of nutrients, as well as anti-inflammatory compounds. This is important, since we know inflammation is a large contributor to cardiovascular damage. As a bonus, foods such as beets, celery, and leafy greens can provide naturally occurring nitrates to help dilate blood vessels and lower blood pressure.

Physical activity can improve your health: Regular activity can help lower blood pressure, suppress the clogging of the arteries (atherosclerosis), support blood vessel growth (atherogenesis), increase insulin sensitivity, and improve blood lipids. It can also help to make your heart and lungs work more efficiently. Always start slowly and talk to your doctor about how much activity is right for you. Avoid over-exertion, especially activity that causes dizziness, moderate shortness of breath, or chest discomfort.

Alcohol: Alcohol can worsen various heart conditions, contribute to cardiomyopathy, alter nutrient absorption, and provide excess calories that can contribute to weight gain. Ask your dietitian or provider about any specific questions or concerns.

Brush & Floss: Poor oral hygiene has been linked to an increased risk of various diseases, including cardiovascular disease. So, take care of that mouth!

Sleep: Sleep is essential for a healthy heart. People who don't sleep enough are at higher risk for cardiovascular disease and coronary heart disease—regardless of age, weight, smoking and exercise habits. Getting enough good quality sleep is important if you want to lower your risk of these conditions.

Stress: Excessive stress and/or anxiety can contribute to everything from hypertension to irritable bowel syndrome. Chronic stress sets off a chain of events that can contribute to hypertension, disease, and various other issues. Some stress is unavoidable in our daily lives but try to find ways to manage stress in a healthy way.