

For Your Health:

Love Your Heart: Habits That Keep It Going Strong

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Did you know that February is American Heart Month? This makes it a great time for people to take stock of their heart health and their habits. While this is important for all people, of any age, to do, it is particularly important for older adults. That's because heart disease remains the leading cause of death and disability among seniors. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ("the CDC"), heart disease affects over 18 percent of individuals aged 65 and older—that's almost 1 out of 5 older adults who experience health issues related to their hearts! In our rural community, where a significant portion of the population is over the age of 65, that means that there are a great many of our family members, friends, and neighbors who are affected by poor heart health. Therefore, there's good reason for all of us to figure out how to adopt heart-healthy habits, and to encourage those in others.

What are those heart-healthy habits? The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute recommends a number of lifestyle changes for better heart health.

Staying active is one of the best things you can do for your heart, and you don't have to start with a marathon; small changes—what we like to call "leveling up"—can really make a big difference. For instance, standing while you drink your morning coffee, taking the stairs, or parking just a bit farther to sneak in extra steps are incremental changes you can make that bring real value. While the goal is to do at least 150 minutes (2½ hours) of exercise each week, you don't have to achieve that in long, rigorous exercise sessions. Instead, start by taking it just 10 minutes at a time, and repeat those "microdoses" of activity as often as you're able.

Eating a heart-healthy diet can make a big difference, too. There's no need to overhaul your pantry—instead, start by making small improvements—what we like to call "trading up"—to what you already eat. For instance, try to limit consuming fatty meats, sugar-sweetened beverages, and highly processed foods, and replace them with lean meats, unsweetened beverages like water, seltzer, or tea, and less processed foods like whole grains. These simple swaps aren't a radical change, but can still go a long way to supporting your heart's health.

Finally, your heart benefits from rest just as much it does from as activity. Aim for 7–9 hours of quality sleep each night. Sticking to a consistent bedtime and wake-up schedule can improve your sleep patterns, helping both your body and heart recharge.

As you start on these changes, try to track your “heart numbers” such as blood pressure, weight, cholesterol, and the amount of physical activity you get each day. This will help you to know where you started—your “baseline”—and also help you to see the progress you’re making. The more you know, the more you can keep your health in the best shape.

Anytime is a good time to get started, so why not now? Visit The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute’s website at <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/> for practical tips, printable resources, and action plans. Along with getting active, eating better, and sleeping well, you’ll find guidance on other key habits like quitting smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, and managing stress. American Heart Month may be wrapping up, but the heart-healthy choices you make today will help your heart all year long!

The Healthcare Consortium is a non-profit organization with a mission of improving access to healthcare and supporting the health and well-being of the residents in our rural community. The agency is located at 325 Columbia St. in Hudson. For more information: visit www.columbiahealthnet.org or call 518-822-8820.