

Lifestyle Changes Prevent Heart Diseases

By James V. Talano, MD, MM FACC
The Southwest Institute for Cardiovascular Fitness & Treatment

Sounds simple doesn't it? Cardiovascular disease is the No. 1 cause of death in the United States. Stroke is the No. 4 cause of death in the United States. One reason these statistics are fact is undeniably a lack of commitment to a heart-healthy lifestyle. Your lifestyle is not only your best defense against heart disease and stroke, it's also your responsibility.

The results from a study that tracked participants for 20 years and recorded the effects of their lifestyle changes was recently released and results proved what most of us already know. The study assessed five important lifestyle factors: alcohol intake, diet, physical activity and cigarette smoking. At the end of the 20 years, positive lifestyle changes were associated with significantly reduced odds of coronary artery calcification and carotid intima-media thickening. In sum, the lifestyle choices you make are directly associated with your chance of developing a heart disease.

A heart-healthy lifestyle includes the ideas listed in the heart below. By following these simple tips you can reduce the modifiable risk factors for heart disease, heart attack and stroke.

Stop Smoking

If you smoke, quit. If someone in your household smokes, encourage them to quit. We know it's tough. But it's tougher to recover from a heart attack or stroke or to live with chronic heart disease. Commit to quit.



Reduce Sugar Intake (even in children)

It is well-known that increased carbohydrate and sugar consumption is associated with higher cardiovascular disease risk among adults. Until recently though little was known about the impact of high consumption of added sugars among US adolescents. A cross-sectional study of 2157 US adolescents in the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) concluded that the consumption of added sugars is positively associated with multiple measures known to increase cardiovascular disease risk.

Choose Good Nutrition

A healthy diet is one of the best weapons you have to fight cardiovascular disease. The food you eat (and the amount) can affect other controllable risk factors: cholesterol, blood pressure, diabetes and overweight. Choose nutrient-rich foods — which have vitamins, minerals, fiber and other nutrients but are lower in calories — over nutrient-poor foods. A diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole-grain and high-fiber foods, fish, lean protein and fat-free or low-fat dairy products is the key. And to maintain a healthy weight, coordinate your diet with your physical activity level so you're using up as many calories as you take in.

People trying to lose weight often turn to one of the mainstream diets but which one is best? Trials comparing different weight-loss diets are frequently limited to the intervention period. Evidence of long term efficacy is sparse. Recently results were released from a trial of 322 moderately obese subjects assigned to low-fat or Mediterranean, restricted-calorie, or low-carb without caloric restriction. Participants' results were tracked for for 18 months without any further intervention. At which point 67% of the participants continued with their original assigned diet, 11% switched to another diet and 22% were not dieting. Results were then recorded following an additional 18 months. Compared to pre-intervention baseline, 18 months after the end of initial diet period, total weight loss was 5.51 lbs for low-fat, 11.91 for Mediterranean and 9.92 for low-carb. As compared to low-fat diet, Mediterranean and low-carb diets are apparently more effective, and the Mediterranean diet seemed to be more stable. This long-term intervention trial had a persistent effect on improved metabolic parameters.

Be Physically Active EVERY Day

Finding time and motivation may be difficult but physical activity can save your life. Research has shown that getting at least 30 minutes of physical activity on 5 or more days of the week can help lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol and keep your weight at a healthy level. But something IS better than nothing. If you're doing nothing now, start out slow. Even 10 minutes at a time may offer some health benefits. Studies show that people who have achieved even a moderate level of fitness are much less likely to die early than those with a low fitness level.

Aim for a Healthy Weight

Obesity is an epidemic in America, not only for adults but also for children. An epidemic is when a health problem is out of control and many people are affected by it. Fad diets and supplements are not the answer. Good nutrition, controlling calorie intake and physical activity are the only way to maintain a healthy weight. Obesity places you at risk for high cholesterol, high blood pressure and insulin resistance, a precursor of type 2 diabetes — the very factors that heighten your risk of cardiovascular disease. Your Body Mass Index (BMI) can help tell you if your weight is healthy.

The best way to beat heart disease is to prevent it by being responsible and taking an active role in your health.

