

HOW TO IMPROVE



From heart-shaped chocolates to heart-shaped pizza, February has no shortage of reminders that it's the month of love.

But Valentine's Day isn't the only heart-related event this month—February is also American Heart Month.

The designation was created to raise awareness of heart disease in the U.S., which remains a leading cause of death for Americans. With so many heart-shaped items in the mix, February is an apt time to give your real heart some attention too.

Facts About Heart Disease

- ♥ Heart disease remains the no. 1 cause of death for adults in the U.S.¹
- ♥ 1 in 4 American deaths are caused by heart disease each year²
- ♥ Heart disease has cost the U.S. as much as \$363 billion in one year³
- ♥ Each year, nearly 805,000 Americans have a heart attack³

How to Lower Your Risk

Fortunately, many of the risk factors for heart disease are preventable when you adapt healthy habits. If you struggle with focusing on your heart health, here are some tips to help you get going.

PRIORITIZE SLEEP

Getting enough sleep isn't only important for healthy brain function—it also plays an important role in your heart health.⁴ As you move through the stages of sleep, your body becomes more relaxed, and your blood pressure drops. The more regular sleep you miss, the longer your blood pressure stays higher. Getting enough sleep helps prevent high blood pressure, which can lead to heart disease. Lack of regular sleep can also make it difficult to maintain other heart-healthy habits, such as physical activity and a healthy diet.

MOVE MORE

You may have heard the phrase "sitting is the new smoking." While it sounds dramatic, it's not that far off the mark. More than 60 percent of Americans⁵ are not getting the recommended level of physical activity, and this lack of movement is one of the leading risk factors associated with heart disease. Not getting enough physical activity can also contribute to other heart disease risk factors, such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and obesity.

The good news? You don't have to be a gym rat for your heart to reap the benefits of physical activity. Taking short walks, standing for an hour or two at your desk (or during meetings if you work from home), and even housework are all simple approaches that can help you get moving and improve your heart health.

EAT MINDFULLY

At this point, we all know what we eat impacts our health. And yet, poor diet remains a leading risk factor for high blood pressure and increased cholesterol, which can lead to heart disease. The American Heart Association suggests limiting saturated fat, trans fat, sodium, red meat, sweets, and sugary beverages to maintain a heart-healthy diet.⁶ That may sound like a handful, but making positive changes to your diet could be as simple as cutting down on soda, using smaller plates to help control your portions, or choosing fruits and veggies for a midday snack. Cooking your own meals is also a great way to dodge the added sugars, fats, and sodium commonly found in processed foods.

No matter how you decide to show your heart some love this month, remember to start with small changes that are sustainable. Drastic lifestyle shifts can be overwhelming, but even minor, positive adjustments in your daily living can help build heart-healthy habits.

¹"Underlying Cause of Death, 1999–2018." *Centers for Disease Control*, 2018

²Virani SS, Alonso A, Benjamin EJ, Bittencourt MS, Callaway CW, Carson AP, et al. "Heart disease and stroke statistics." *Circulation*, 2021

³"Heart Disease Facts." *Centers for Disease Control*, 2022

⁴"How Does Sleep Affect Your Heart Health?" *Centers for Disease Control*, 2021

⁵"Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General." *Centers for Disease Control*

⁶"The American Heart Association Diet and Lifestyle Recommendations." *The American Heart Association*, 2021