



Registered Dietitians



Department of
Veterans Affairs
Leading the way to better health

Lifestyle Changes to Improve Heart Health

Take Action

- ♥ The first step is to get at least 30 minutes of activity on most or all days of the week. Any activity counts if it makes you breathe harder. If you can't be active for 30 minutes all at once, get at least 10 minutes at a time to add up to at least 30 minutes by the end of the day.
 - ♥ Do things you enjoy to become more active. You can go for a brisk walk, ride a bike, dance, or swim.
 - ♥ Make being active a part of your daily routine. You can take the stairs, park at the far end of the parking lot, mow the lawn with a push mower, rake leaves, trim hedges without a power tool, carry your golf clubs, or walk the golf course.
 - ♥ Being active helps your heart. Exercise raises HDL (good) cholesterol, improves blood sugar and blood pressure, and aids in weight management.
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Watch Your Weight

- ♥ Weight and heart disease are related. Being overweight increases your risk of heart disease.
 - ♥ Follow an eating schedule. Plan your meals and snacks in advance and stick to it. Eat slowly, taking at least 20 minutes to eat a meal and 10 minutes for a snack. Leave the table when you are through eating. Throw away or put up leftovers right away.
 - ♥ Keep problem foods out of the house. Never shop for food on an empty stomach. Make a grocery list and stick to it. Avoid areas of the store that have foods that are not on your list. Do not take others with you if they get you to buy foods not on your list!
 - ♥ No one is perfect. Treat yourself to a small serving or split a dessert if you crave sweets. Do not give up if you stray from a healthy eating plan. Try to get back on track as soon as possible!
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Do Not Smoke

- ♥ Cigarette smoking thickens and narrows artery walls and decreases your HDL (good) cholesterol. It increases your risk of a heart attack or stroke.
- ♥ If you smoke, contact your healthcare provider to discuss how they can help you quit.

Alcohol

- ♥ If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation. This means an average of one to two drinks a day for men and one drink a day for women. A drink is one 12-ounce beer, 4 ounces of wine, 1 ½ ounces of 80-proof spirits, or one ounce of 100-proof spirits.
- ♥ Light drinkers have a lower risk of heart disease than nondrinkers. However, drinking alcohol increases public health dangers such as alcoholism, high blood pressure, obesity, stroke, breast cancer, suicide, and accidents. Given these and other risks, the American Heart Association cautions people **not** to start drinking if they do not already drink alcohol.
- ♥ Discuss the risks and benefits of light drinking with your healthcare provider.

Blood Pressure

- ♥ High blood pressure is a risk factor for heart disease.
- ♥ If you have high blood pressure, work with your healthcare provider to control your blood pressure.

Diabetes

- ♥ Diabetes is a risk factor for heart disease.
- ♥ If you have diabetes, work with your healthcare provider to control your blood sugar.

Ask For Help

- ♥ Eat a healthy diet to take care of your heart. Ask to see a Registered Dietitian to learn more about a healthy eating plan.
 - ♥ Exercise on a regular basis to take care of your heart. Ask for help in planning an exercise program if needed.
 - ♥ If you take medicine, be sure you take it as ordered. Ask for help if you have any questions about medicines that you are taking.
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Contact your local VA dietitian for more information.