



FEBRUARY  
IS HEART  
HEALTH  
MONTH

# Improve Our Heart Health

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The heart is, no doubt, the most important muscle in your body. You train your biceps, you train your back, why wouldn't you train to improve your heart health?

The heart acts as a pump which delivers blood to all of your organ systems, providing them with oxygen and essential nutrients so all of your bodily processes can carry on smoothly.

Heart health encompasses many components, but the two main ones we want to keep in mind are:

- 1) Maintaining a strong myocardium (muscle heart tissue) to allow forceful contraction of the heart's chambers to efficiently pump the blood out to our body tissues. A weak heart muscle can lead to increased blood pressure, shortness of breath, fatigue, and other complications.
- 2) Maintaining the integrity of our coronary artery circulation. These are the blood vessels that feed the heart itself nutrients and oxygen, so it can maintain normal function. These vessels are very small in diameter and therefore are susceptible to becoming narrowed due to plaque buildup which manifests as atherosclerosis. Atherosclerosis first leads to decreased perfusion of the heart muscle, and if the plaque becomes so large that it blocks off the entire vessel, can result in a myocardial infarction, more commonly known as a heart attack.

So, let's see how we can improve our heart health!



## DIET AND NUTRITION

Being overweight or obese may not directly affect the health of your heart, but it predisposes you to develop health conditions which are substantial risk factors for cardiovascular disease. Obesity often leads to hypertension (high blood pressure), diabetes, and atherosclerosis (thickening or hardening of the arteries caused by plaque buildup). **Therefore, maintaining a healthy body weight, through adequate caloric consumption, is of utmost importance.** Additionally, high quality nutrients are also key.

### Foods/substances to avoid or minimize:

- alcohol
- processed food: bacon, sausages, jerky, most frozen meat products such as chicken strips and hamburgers
- sugar: baked goods, sugary drinks
- deep fried foods: consider using your air fryer!
- high salt foods: potato chips, instant noodles, and other pre-packaged food

### Focusing on consuming more:

- fruits: these are nutrient dense but should be eaten in moderation due to sugar content
- vegetables
- high protein foods: chicken, turkey, moderate amounts of beef, beans, eggs, peas, lentils, tofu, nuts, milk, fish and shellfish



## SMOKING AND VAPING

How does smoking affect your heart? It raises your LDL (“bad”) cholesterol, lowers your HDL (“good”) cholesterol, speeds up your resting heart rate, raises your blood pressure. **This makes your heart work harder, and makes you 2-4x more likely to suffer a heart attack than non-smokers.**

If you have never picked up this habit, that’s great! However if you are an existing smoker/vaper, there is some good news: you start improving your health as soon as you stop!

### What happens after you quit?

#### In the first week:

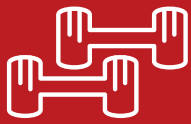
Blood pressure and resting heart rate decreases, blood oxygen levels increase, heart attack risk decreases, lung capacity increases.

#### After a couple of months:

Blood circulation and lung function improve.

#### And the benefits keep accumulating!

After 15 years of not smoking, your heart attack risk decreases to the level of someone who never smoked!



## EXERCISE

Combining aerobic exercise with resistance training produces the greatest benefit for preventing and managing heart disease. **Strive to be active at least 2.5 hours a week, but more is better!**

Each person is unique, and finding an activity you enjoy is key to remain consistent and disciplined. Jogging, running, cycling, swimming, and team sports such as pickleball and hockey are great examples of aerobic activities, but this is by no means an exhaustive list – find what you like and stick to it! The key to aerobic training is increasing your heart rate and breathing rate, which will not only train your leg or arm muscles, but also, the number one most important muscle in your body... your heart!

Resistance training is also essential. This may include lifting weights, working out with bands/TRX, body-weight exercises such as pull ups, push ups, dips and sit ups, and various fitness classes utilizing TRX bands, barbells, and dumbbells are all great activities to add to your routine.

To prevent injury and see optimal results, focus on proper execution of the movements. Progressive overload is also very important to improve the function and capacity of your muscles, which means progressively increasing intensity of your chosen exercises. **Workout logs are an important part of tracking progress.**

### Information to include in your workout log:

- name of each exercise
- weight
- repetitions
- sets
- rest time
- observations on form, and how your body feels



## STRESS

Mental health is underestimated and often overlooked when considering heart health. Stress can lead people to overeat, exercise less, and have disrupted sleep. **Stress can directly affect your heart by increasing blood pressure through abnormal release of adrenaline.**

Improving your work-life balance, practicing relaxation through walking in nature, yoga, or meditation, spending more time with friends and

family, and seeking help and advice from your social group or a mental health therapist are all great ways to reduce stress. Each person copes with stress in their own way and may achieve great outcomes by simply being aware of their stress and reflecting on what contributes to it, so they can attempt to address those imbalances in their life.

**Make this month the one where you take your heart health into your hands, and let’s get it pumping!**