Basic Tips to Follow for Cardiovascular Health and Wellness

- Eat a heart-healthy diet
- Exercise regularly
- Don't smoke
- Reduce your stress level
- Maintain a healthy weight for your age and body type
- Don't drink to excess
- Schedule regular health screenings

What's a heart-healthy diet?

There's a strong correlation between heart disease and diet. There is a reason people living around the Mediterranean – who have diets consisting of fresh fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, unrefined grains, olive oil and fish – tend to live longer and have a much lower occurrence of heart disease.

A study of adults in Greece who ate a traditional Mediterranean diet found they were 33 percent less likely to die from heart disease and 24 percent less likely to die from any cause during the study's 44-month tracking period.

Another study of people between the ages of 70 and 90 who adhered to the Mediterranean diet found their mortality rate was 23 percent lower than the global average. That rate jumped up to 50 percent when the study's participants refrained from tobacco use, exercised regularly and only consumed moderate amounts of alcohol.

There have also been studies that tie the Mediterranean diet to reduced Alzheimer's risk and lower occurrences and symptom intensity of arthritis.

Most physician-recommended heart-healthy diets share many commonalities with a traditional Mediterranean diet:

- **Exercise portion-size control** – Don't eat until you're stuffed and eat larger portions of low-calorie, nutrition-rich foods and smaller portions of high-calorie, high-sodium foods.
- **Eat more vegetables and fruits** – Most vegetables are low in calories but rich in dietary fiber, vitamins and minerals. Fresh fruits and vegetables are preferable to frozen varieties if you have access to fresh produce.
- **Eat whole grains instead of refined grains** – Breads, pastas, cereals and oatmeal that are comprised of whole-wheat flower and grains are preferable to refined white flour, muffins, doughnuts, cakes and other refined, sugary bread products.

- **Stick to healthy fats** – Limiting your unhealthy fat intake is important for heart health. Trans fats and saturated fats are closely linked with high cholesterol and plaque buildup in arteries. When possible substitute butter, margarine and shortening with extra virgin olive oil and check food labels to avoid overly fatty foods.
- **Eat low-fat, nutritious proteins** – Choosing fish, poultry, eggs and low-fat dairy products instead of red meat, marbled meats, full-fat dairy products, organ meats and processed meats will help you cut out a lot of unhealthy fats while giving you more omega-3 fatty acids and fiber.
- **Eliminate sodium where possible** – Sodium is closely linked to high blood pressure. Many experts recommend having no more than 1,500 mg of sodium a day. Low-fat, nutritious frozen meals and soups may advertise as healthy and contain fewer calories than alternative options, but make sure to check sodium before you purchase them. Many of these seemingly healthy meals are filled with sodium and high-processed ingredients.

How much should you exercise?
The American Heart Association recommends getting at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity every week. You can combine these two recommendations in any way you wish – like 25 minutes of vigorous physical activity and 100 minutes of moderate physical activity.

You burn calories all the time, but exercise is an especially efficient way to boost the number of calories you burn every day. If you want to maintain your weight you should aim to consume no more calories than you burn.

People can exercise at any age; you just need to find an exercise that works for you and minimize your risk for injury. It's also a good idea to diversify your workout to ensure you're taking steps to strengthen your heart and control your weight.

Try to develop an exercise routine that includes aerobic exercise and resistance training, as these are considered the most important types of exercise for heart health.

Aerobic exercise, like brisk walking, swimming and cycling, improves cardiac output, lowers blood pressure and resting heart rate and reduces your risk for type 2 diabetes.

Resistance training, often called strength training, is great for eliminating body fat – which is a risk factor for heart disease – and building lean muscle. Lifting free weights, using weight machines or doing pushups, chin-ups or squats are all resistance training exercises.

Studies have shown that people who regularly perform aerobic exercise and resistance training raise good cholesterol (HDL) and lower bad cholesterol (LDL).

Drinking and Heart Health

You'll occasionally see a study that says a glass of wine a day can be heart healthy. This may be true – for some people. Everyone is different, but it's safe to say that drinking to excess is bad for everyone, regardless of their current health.

Studies that claim moderate alcohol consumption is good for heart health can also be misleading. It's unclear whether the results of those studies are due to alcohol consumption or the healthy lifestyle choices to which many light drinkers adhere.

If you don't currently drink, you shouldn't start because there may be a heart health benefit. If you are a heavy drinker – more than one or two 12 ounce beers, 5 ounces of wine or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof liquor a day – you should cut back to better your wellness and heart health.

Binge drinking, which is defined as four or more drinks for women or five or more drinks for men in a two-hour span, can cause arrhythmias, or irregular heartbeats.

If you have a history of heart failure, cardiomyopathy, diabetes, arrhythmia, stroke or high triglycerides, it will likely be better for your heart to abstain from alcohol altogether.

You should also discuss alcohol consumption with your doctor if you are taking any medications that have the potential to interact poorly with alcohol.