

6 WAYS TO SHOW YOUR HEART SOME LOVE

Contributed by Mandy Enright, MS, RDN, RYT

February is Heart Month and a great reminder that there are things we can do year-round to support our heart health. Heart disease continues to be the #1 killer worldwide and does not discriminate among age, race, or sex. Heart disease is also one of the most preventable chronic diseases when we follow daily lifestyle habits that support our heart health. Here are six ways you can support your heart health all year long.

1. Read Nutrition Labels & Look at the 'S's

Nutrition labels are a key tool to assess if you are choosing foods that are helpful or harmful to your heart health. Most important, there are three "S's" you should be aware of that have significant implications on heart health:

- Saturated Fat
- Sodium
- Added Sugars

When you are looking at a food label, aim to stay at or close to <5% Daily Value for saturated fats, sodium, and added sugars per serving. This indicates that the food item you are choosing is lower in these nutrients that have been linked to high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, and increased risk of heart disease and stroke.

2. Increase Your Fiber Intake

If there is one nutrient people should be consuming more of in their days, it's fiber. Fiber plays a critical role in supporting our heart health by helping to lower blood pressure, lower LDL (aka "bad") cholesterol, reduce blood glucose levels by slowing glucose absorption, and helps maintain a healthy weight. Fiber-rich foods also provide heart-health benefits including boosting our HDL (aka "good") cholesterol production, reducing inflammation, and supporting our digestive health. Here are some ways to increase your fiber intake:

- Eat more fiber-rich foods at every meal and snack including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, legumes, nuts and seeds.
- Aim to fill half your plate at every meal and snack with either vegetables or a combination of fruits and vegetables.
- Read food labels and look for items that have at least 3 to 5 grams of fiber per serving.

3. Cook More at Home

The pandemic got more people cooking at home. Many people saw the benefits including better control over ingredients, portions, and cost. Dining out is one of the biggest culprits of increased intake of saturated fats, trans fats, sodium, and added sugars. Combine with large portion sizes, and you're putting your heart health at risk. Here are some small goals you can set to prepare more meals at home and dine out less:

- Aim to prepare at least three dinners at home each week and make enough so that you have leftovers for another dinner or lunch.
- A little meal planning goes a long way – once you know the three meals you will make for the week, prepare your shopping list accordingly so you can purchase what you need. Also think about planning for breakfast, lunch, and snacks to buy what you need.
- Don't forget that goal of making at least half your plate colorful vegetables and fruit – it's a lot easier to meet this goal when we make meals at home.





4. Get Moving

Your heart LOVES daily movement! Movement, particularly cardiovascular activity, helps keep your heart strong and working efficiently for you. Daily movement helps to reduce blood pressure, lower LDL while increasing HDL cholesterol, lower stress, and helps to maintain a healthy weight. Movement does not have to be time-consuming. Find ways to add movement into your day in the form of walks, standing more, and taking the stairs. Do activity that keeps you motivated and consider a tracking system that helps you to see how much movement you are getting per day or week such as marking a calendar, using your smart watch, or an app.

5. Prioritize Sleep

Sleep is a critical time to rest and recharge the body. Poor sleep has been linked to increased risk of elevated blood pressure, elevated LDL cholesterol, elevated glucose levels, insulin resistance, inflammation, weight gain, and overall higher mortality. Aim for 7 to 9 hours of quality sleep per night and establish a bedtime routine that helps you wind down at the end of the day. Consider these tips to get a better night's sleep:

- Put electronic devices to bed at least one hour before bed. This includes laptops, tablets, and phones.
- Do relaxing activities at the end of the day such as reading a book, spending time with family, or taking a hot shower or bath before bed.
- Make your room dark and cool to stay comfortable while sleeping. Use layers like blankets and socks and items like eye masks and ear plugs to block out light and noise to help you sleep better.

6. Manage Stress

Stress and heart health, particularly blood pressure, are strongly linked. Finding ways to effectively manage your stress will not only help to reduce stress levels but also support your heart health. Taking breaks, setting boundaries, and effectively communicating your feelings and needs can all help reduce stress levels.

Want to dive into these heart healthy habits further? Contact Wellness Concepts by visiting well-concepts.com to set up employee wellness sessions including nutrition and sleep seminars, cooking demos, fitness classes, and stress management sessions that will help reinforce these heart health habits.



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