

# Ask the Expert

## Lifestyle Choices to Improve Heart Health

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States.

Some risk factors are uncontrollable – gender, race, family history, age – yet there are many things you can control when it comes to preventing heart disease. Consciously making decisions to protect our heart health can also result in a healthier lifestyle, and hopefully many more years to enjoy.

Choices to improve your heart health include:

### **Give up Smoking**

Smoking cigarettes or using any other kind of tobacco is one of the biggest risk factors when it comes to developing heart disease.

The chemicals found in tobacco damage your heart and narrow your arteries, while the carbon monoxide leads to increased blood pressure and heart rate.

The more you smoke, the greater your risk, even social smoking greatly increases the your chances to develop heart disease.

**Develop the Diet** - Living in a fast food dependent culture, it's easy to get sidetracked from one of the simplest ways to fight heart disease – how you eat.

A heart-healthy diet is a crucial step toward better

heart health. Mounds of research show that a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, fish and other superfoods will significantly reduce your risk of heart disease.

By incorporating the following superfoods into your diet, you're helping your heart and keeping your whole body healthy. Remember to limit the saturated and trans fats that you are taking in by monitoring the amount of red meat, dairy products, and fried food you consume. It is also important to make sure any alcohol intake is done in moderation.

**Salmon** - Rich in omega-3 fatty acids and protein, salmon is a beneficial, heart-healthy fat that is proven to help reduce cholesterol and blood pressure, as well as the risk of heart disease and stroke. In addition, it helps reduce the risk of developing blood clots and illnesses linked to inflammation, such as lupus and arthritis.

**Oatmeal** - According to the American Heart Association, soluble fiber has been associated with increased diet quality and decreased risk of cardiovascular disease by reducing the absorption of cholesterol in the bloodstream. Oats have the highest proportion of soluble fiber of any grain. Starting your day with a serving of cooked oatmeal topped with some fruit is not only good for your heart, but will keep you full until lunch time.

**Berries** - A recent study conducted by the Harvard

School of Public Health found that eating three servings of berries a week can reduce the risk of a heart attack in women by 32 percent. However, study authors say this is good news for everyone, not just women. In addition to being an excellent source of vitamin C and fiber, the anthocyanins, which give fruit its color, are proven to reduce blood pressure and arterial inflammation, as well as help protect arterial walls from developing plaque.

**Leafy greens** - Your mom was on to something when she told you to eat your greens. Broccoli, spinach, brussel sprouts and kale pack a powerful punch to your heart health. These leafy greens are full of vitamins (including vitamin K, so if you're taking warfarin, talk to your doctor) and rich in fiber, which lowers cholesterol and reduces your risk of heart disease. They also reduce inflammation in your body. If you aren't a fan of leafy greens, try adding a couple handfuls of spinach into your fruit smoothies. It changes the color, but not the taste.

Almonds are the perfect portable snack, salad topper and are proven to lower total cholesterol and increase good cholesterol. In addition, they are packed with antioxidants and nutrients, such as fiber, riboflavin, magnesium, iron and calcium. Be sure to watch your serving size because the fat and calories can add up fast.

**Exercise Each Week** - You don't have to become a marathon runner, but getting

regular exercise is a huge factor in reducing the risk of heart disease. Working out allows you to control your weight and keep your heart from feeling strained. If you work out moderately for 30-60 minutes several times per week, this can reap major benefits. Try incorporating exercise into your daily routine by walking the dog, jogging with the stroller, or even cleaning the house.

**Sleep Soundly** - You may think that missing sleep will simply leave you tired, but it can also have a negative effect on your health. Sleep deprivation can lead to obesity, high blood pressure, heart attack, diabetes, and even depression. Attempt to get seven to nine hours of sleep each night and try to stick to a schedule.

**See Your Doctor** - Regular checkups can help you better maintain your health on all levels. Getting your cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood sugar tested at your doctor's office can provide you with information on how to change your lifestyle in order to avoid developing heart disease. If you're interested in learning more about your heart health, find out how NEA Baptist's HeartScore can help.

Join us for "Heart Day at NEA" - Thursday, February 19 in the NEA Baptist Clinic lobby (4802 E. Johnson) for free health screenings, educational materials and giveaways, along with fun activities for participants of all ages. Call 870-936-8000. We hope you will take this opportunity to be proactive about your heart health!

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