START WITH THE HEART

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Hearts are everywhere come February 1st — chocolate hearts, heart-shaped balloons, even heart-shaped diamond rings. Valentine's Day reminds us to show love and appreciation to those in our lives, but February is also a great month to focus on taking care of our actual hearts. Heart disease is the No. 1 killer of men and women in the U.S. It's a frightening statistic, but the good news is that most heart-related diseases can be prevented.

The human heart is one of the most important organs in the entire human body. Weighing in at 8 ounces, the heart pumps oxygenated and nutrient-rich blood throughout our bodies to keep us alive. Just like your biceps, triceps and quads, your heart is a muscle that needs to be worked out. However, because your heart can't lift a dumbbell, the way to keep your heart muscle strong is by doing cardiovascular exercises. These include jogging, walking, cycling, swimming, dancing, and many more. Cardiovascular exercise can also help you maintain a healthy weight. As you exercise, you burn calories. If you burn more calories than you consume in a day, you will lose weight. Another way to control your weight and keep your heart healthy is increasing lean muscle mass. More muscle mass means you burn more calories just by being you.

Being overweight and obese increases the risk of heart disease and high blood pressure. A larger body needs more blood, which causes the heart to grow slightly larger so it can move more blood throughout the body. This increased flow of blood often causes high blood pressure. About 34% of American adults are considered obese and are at a higher-than-normal risk of developing heart disease.[1] Even if you never lose a single pound, you are still able to protect your heart by eating healthy and exercising. However, maintaining a healthy weight lowers your risk for developing these conditions, helps you feel good about yourself, and gives you more energy to live an active lifestyle.

Along with an active lifestyle, the heart yearns for a nutritious environment to thrive in. What you eat directly affects your heart's function. Foods that are high in fat, salt or sugar are detrimental to your heart's health. Foods high in antioxidants, like fruits and vegetables and foods rich in soluble fiber, like beans and whole grains, can help lower bad cholesterol levels and leave your heart beating strong. The American Heart Association (AHA) started the Heart-Check Food Certification Program, in which foods at the grocery store bear a red heart with a white check mark on the package. This symbol signals to consumers that that food contains heart-healthy ingredients; but what really defines a "heart-healthy food?" Foods that contain omega-3 fatty acids, folate, monounsaturated fats, lycopene, magnesium, polyphenols and more are considered "heart-healthy foods." The AHA also recommends that we eat a variety of vegetables and fruits, whole grains, lean meats, fish, nuts and legumes, and that we limit our intake of saturated fats, sodium, hydrogenated vegetable oils and alcohol.

If you think your heart is in need of a makeover, check out these 5 ways to get your heart in shape:

1. Get Your Heart Pumping! It's not rocket science that exercising will help keep you healthy and fit. Exercising your heart muscle 30 minutes a day, 4 to 5x's a week will help improve your overall cardiovascular health and cut the risk of heart disease.

2. Manage Your Stress. Yoga and meditation are great ways to stretch out, quiet the mind and calm your racing thoughts and heart rate. Taking a five-minute walk to cool down after a stressful day can make a huge difference for your health. Also, listening to music that makes you feel happy and calm has powerful affects on lowering blood pressure, relieving pain and relieving anxiety.

3. Eat Your Way to a Healthy Heart. Eating fruits and vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins are all ways to support your heart. Fish like salmon, tuna and sardines in particular, could reduce your risk of heart disease by a third or more because of the benefits of omega-3 fatty acids.

4. Laugh Often. Laughing relieves stress, strengthens blood vessels, and helps your blood flow. Indulge in a Rom-Com or catch a few episodes of your favorite TV show to get a few good hearty laughs in every day.

5. Get Some Sleep! Not getting enough sleep each night could lead to an increased risk in heart-related diseases. Without adequate shuteye, cholesterol levels could increase, weight gain could result, and blood pressure levels could rise. Try to get anywhere from 6 to 8 hours of sleep a night!

For more information on keeping your heart healthy or to learn how to get involved with raising awareness about heart health, check out these organizations: American Heart Association, Go Red for Women, World Heart Organization.

[1] http://consumer.healthday.com/encyclopedia/heart-health-22/misc-stroke-related-heart-news-360/obesity-and-heart-disease-644588.html