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Steps for a Healthy Heart

Heart disease causes more than one in every four deaths in the United States, and each year over 631,000 people die from this condition, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Additionally, each year about 785,000 Americans have a first heart attack, while another 470,000 who have already had one or more, have another. When health care services, medications and lost productivity from heart disease are all added up, it's estimated this disease will cost the United States over \$316 billion -- yes, *billion* -- in 2010.

These numbers are truly staggering because heart disease is a condition that can be prevented most of the time by leading a healthy lifestyle.

The American Heart Association, in acknowledging that better lifestyle habits can help reduce your risk for heart attack and help prevent heart disease and stroke, has come out with their new "Life's Simple 7" steps toward a healthier heart.

They have a few smart choices on the list, but I do not agree with others. Plus, they have left out at least three extremely important additions. So I want to discuss their list with you in detail, and then share the heart healthy recommendations they have missed, which virtually everyone reading this could benefit from.

Quitting Smoking for Your Heart

There's no doubt that smoking takes a toll on your heart, and if you smoke, quitting will benefit your health. This would not be the number one goal on my list, as it is on the AHA's, as I believe you should get your nutritional program on track first, then tackle the cigarettes.

The primary reason I make this seemingly paradoxical recommendation is that it has been my experience that most people tend to reward themselves with many dangerous sugar treats when they quit. This will increase their insulin level and actually increase their risk for heart disease higher than if they had continued to smoke and not worsened their dietary choices.

Additionally, dietary improvements will go a long way toward helping you give up nicotine. Good nutrition will also minimize feelings of depression you may encounter when you quit smoking. And you'll feel healthier in general, which can help motivate you to stick with your smoking cessation program. Most experts believe that the safest and best way to quit smoking is cold turkey. Research shows that in the long run, smokers who quit cold turkey do better than those who used "helps" like nicotine gum, the patch, or quit-smoking drugs. These drugs, in particular, are a very bad idea, as some have life-threatening side effects.

A Healthy Weight for a Healthy Heart

A large 10-year study found that half of all fatal heart disease cases, and a quarter of all non-fatal cases are linked to being overweight and having a high body mass index (BMI) or large waist.

However, BMI, which gauges weight in relation to height, is only a crude way to judge obesity-related heart disease risk. It does not measure where fat is on your body or how muscular you might be. Athletes and completely out-of-shape people can have similar BMI scores, for instance, and previous research has demonstrated that a potbelly is a better predictor of heart trouble than total weight.

If you're not sure if you have a healthy waist circumference, a general guide is:

- For men, between 37 and 40 inches is overweight and more than 40 inches is obese
- For women, 31.5-34.6 inches is overweight and more than 34.6 inches is obese

Either way, if you're overweight, obese or have excess belly fat, there's no better way to trim fat than eating a healthy diet AND exercising regularly.

Exercise: A MUST for Your Heart

Exercise not only lowers inflammation in your body, it is also one of the best weapons to fight visceral fat, which again is linked to heart disease.

Remember, you can be thin, underweight even, and still have dangerous visceral fat around your organs. If you are thin, but rarely exercise, this may be you.

Exercise can drastically reduce any visceral fat, and quickly too, along with acting as a fountain of youth for your heart, making it metabolically younger.

How to Keep Your Blood Pressure Healthy

Uncontrolled high blood pressure is a very serious health concern that can cause heart disease and increase your risk of having a stroke. It is especially dangerous because hypertension often has no warning signs or symptoms, and it is extremely common.

The risk of becoming hypertensive is greater than 90 percent for individuals in developed countries, according to an editorial in the [Lancet](#).

Some of the main causes of hypertension include lifestyle factors that you have total control over, which are primarily related to your insulin levels (for example, eating a high-grain and high-sugar diet, and not exercising).

To find out how to normalize your blood pressure, please read [How You Can Normalize Your Blood Pressure Without Drugs](#).

Fasting Insulin Levels: An Important Risk Factor for Heart Disease

Any meal or snack high in unhealthy carbohydrates like sugar and refined grains generates a rapid rise in blood glucose and then insulin to compensate for the rise in blood sugar. The insulin released from eating too many carbohydrates promotes fat and makes it more difficult for your body to lose fat, and excess weight, particularly around your belly, is one of the major contributors to heart disease.

Further, studies have shown that people with a fasting blood sugar level of 100-125 mg/dl had a nearly 300% increase higher risk of having coronary heart disease than people with a level below 79 mg/dl. Normal fasting blood glucose is below 100 mg/dl, but for optimal health it should be closer to 80. Reducing your intake of grains, including corn-based foods, and all sweets and potatoes will help to lower your blood glucose if it is elevated.

What is a Healthy Cholesterol Level?

Your total cholesterol level is just about worthless in determining your risk for heart disease, unless it is close to 300 or higher, so I do not agree with the AHA's recommendation on cholesterol levels. Your fasting insulin level is a far better predictor for heart disease.

You need to be aware that cholesterol is not the CAUSE of heart disease. If you become overly concerned with trying to lower your cholesterol level to some set number, you will be completely missing the real problem.

In fact, I have seen a number of people with levels over 250 who actually were at low heart disease risk due to their HDL levels. Conversely, I have seen even more who had cholesterol levels under 200 that were at a very high risk of heart disease based on the following additional tests:

- Your HDL/Cholesterol ratio
- Your Triglyceride/HDL ratios
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HDL percentage is a very potent heart disease risk factor. Just divide your HDL level by your cholesterol. That percentage should ideally be above 24 percent. Below 10 percent, it's a significant indicator of risk for heart disease.

You can also do the same thing with your triglycerides and HDL ratio. That percentage should be below 2.

A Heart-Healthy Diet

A healthy diet for your heart should be based on your nutritional type, and include plenty of whole, fresh, organic (and preferably biodynamic) foods, at least one-third of which should be raw. You can view my nutrition plan to get started.

Additionally, you should be sure you're getting plenty of animal-based omega-3 fats, such as those from krill oil, as they are phenomenal for your heart.

What Did the AHA Forget to Mention?

The AHA's list left out two of the most important factors you need to know to keep your heart healthy. These deserve to be at the top of your list, and are items that virtually everyone can benefit from.

1. Optimize Your Vitamin D Level

Studies show that people with the lowest average vitamin D levels had a 124 percent greater risk of dying from all causes and a 378 percent greater risk of dying from a heart problem!

Those are massively increased risks -- risks that could have been avoided simply by optimizing vitamin D. Further, researchers from Finland also showed that when compared with the participants with the highest vitamin D, those with the lowest levels had a 25 percent higher risk of dying from heart disease or stroke. And when only stroke was looked at, those with the lowest levels had twice the risk as those with the highest.

A previous study even found women who take vitamin D supplements lower their risk of death from heart disease by one-third.

It's also been suggested that the more sunlight you get, the better your cardiovascular health will be, as there are a number of physiological mechanisms triggered by vitamin D production through sunlight exposure that act to fight heart disease, such as:

- An increase in your body's natural anti-inflammatory cytokines
- The suppression of vascular calcification
- The inhibition of vascular smooth muscle growth

2. Manage Your Stress Levels with Healthy Emotional Outlets

One of the most common contributing factors to heart disease is unresolved emotional stresses. Anger, stress, guilt, sadness -- really any emotion that doesn't make you feel good -- can lead to heart attacks, obesity and strokes. Even the best diet in the world is not likely to overcome the damage created by lingering emotional stresses.

Further, when your body is under the stress response, your cortisol levels rise. And when your cortisol is chronically elevated, you'll tend to gain weight around your midsection, which further increases your heart disease risk.

While you cannot eliminate stress entirely, you can work to provide your body with tools to compensate for the bioelectrical short-circuiting that can cause serious disruption in many of your body's important systems. By using techniques such as Meridian Tapping, you can reprogram your body's reactions to the unavoidable stressors of everyday life.

3. Make Certain Your Iron Levels are Not Elevated

Iron can be a very potent oxidative stress, so if you have excess iron levels you can damage your blood vessels and increase your risk of heart disease.

Ideally, you should monitor your ferritin levels and make sure they are not much above 80 ng/ml. The simplest way to lower them if they are elevated is to donate your blood. If that is not possible you can have a therapeutic phlebotomy and that will effectively eliminate the excess iron from your body.

Remember, heart disease is one of the easiest diseases to prevent and avoid, but you simply must be proactive in order to do this. Many people don't realize that the most common symptom of heart disease is actually sudden death -- not chest pain or shortness of breath. Most of the time there are NO warning signs, so that's why knowing, and monitoring, your risk factors is critical.