Employee NEWSLETTER

Making Your Lifestyle Heart Healthy

Did you know February is Heart Health Month? The millions of Americans diagnosed with heart and cardiovascular diseases can benefit from making healthful choices in their day-to-day lives.

"While it's certainly necessary to take medications to lower high cholesterol or blood pressure, it's equally important to have a healthy lifestyle," says Richard Stein, M.D., chief of the department of medicine in the Singer Division at Beth Israel Hospital in New York City, and a spokesman for the American Heart Association. "People who are informed and proactive when it comes to lowering their health risks are very likely to avoid heart disease and heart attacks."

By following these recommendations, people at normal risk for heart disease can reduce their risk and make their lives more enjoyable.

Eat a healthful diet

Eating a healthy diet has been proven to reduce the risk for heart disease. To eat a heart-healthy diet:

- Eat 2 cups of fresh fruits and 2.5 cups of vegetables every day.
- Limit saturated and trans fats by using olive oil or other vegetable oils instead of butter or margarine.
- Eat more chicken and fish and less red meat.
- Eat 6 ounces of grains, of which at least 3 ounces should be from whole-grain bread and cereal.
- Limit or eliminate fast foods, which are often loaded with salt, sugar and fats.

- If you drink alcohol, do so moderately - no more than 2 drinks a day if you're a man, 1 if you're a woman.
- Limit your salt/sodium to 2300mg.
- Get the equivalent of 3 cups of fat free or low-fat milk or dairy products.

Exercise more

Regular exercise keeps your heart and the rest of your body in shape. To add more activity to your life:

- Check with your doctor before starting an exercise program if you've been sedentary and/or have a chronic disease.
- Start slowly and increase your activity gradually to a total of 30 to 60 minutes of moderate exercise most days of the week.
- Do weight training and stretching exercises several times a week.

Stop smoking

Smoking is a major risk factor for heart disease. To live smoke free:

- Decide to quit and set a quit date. Try again if you fail. Successful quitters have "quit" an average of nine times.
- Ask your doctor for information about cessation aids, such as a patch, inhaler and counseling/support program.

Learn to relax

Chronic anger and stress can damage your heart. To better cope with life's pressures:

- Try to be positive instead of negative in your outlook on life.
- Take 15 to 20 minutes a day to sit quietly and breathe deeply.
- Take time for yourself each day. Read a book, listen to music or enjoy a hobby.

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Monitor your health

Be proactive when it comes to your heart's health. To do so, work with your health care provider to reduce your heart disease risk by following up with him or her for treatment for high blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

"Denial is the number one risk factor for having a heart attack," says Dr. Stein. "Call 911 immediately if you have chest pain if you're a man, or are short of breath, dizzy and have a burning sensation in the chest area if you're a woman. If you can get to a hospital in the same hour these symptoms start, it's possible to prevent a heart attack or limit the damage."

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