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Take These Steps for a Healthier Heart

According to a 2016 report by the American Heart Association, heart disease is the leading cause of death in both men and women. It also costs the United States about \$207 billion each year in health care services, medications, and lost productivity.

Thomas Willke MD, a family medicine doctor at Indian Springs Family Medicine, suggests three critical steps to help keep your heart healthy and strong.



Tip #1: If You Smoke, Stop!

Did you know that a year after quitting smoking, your risk of dying from a heart attack or stroke is reduced by up to 50 percent?

Smoking – even just a couple cigarettes daily – has been linked to a variety of health conditions, including cardiovascular problems. “Absolutely get rid of all cigarettes,” Dr. Willke stresses.

Tip #2: Know Your Cholesterol Numbers

Cholesterol is a soft, wax-like substance found in all parts of the body. While your body needs a little bit of cholesterol to work properly, too much cholesterol can clog your arteries, leading to heart disease.

It's important to know your cholesterol levels, which are determined from calculations and measurements of low-density lipoprotein (LDL), high-density lipoprotein (HDL) and triglycerides. Standard total cholesterol goals for adults are:

- **Best:** lower than 200
- **Borderline high:** 200 - 239
- **High:** 240 and higher

The Most Important Cholesterol Level to Watch: LDL

LDL, or “bad,” cholesterol level is what your doctor monitors the closest. Your risk for heart disease goes down significantly if your LDL level is low. The optimal LDL level for most people is below 100 mg/dL (If you have a history of heart disease or are at a very high risk for developing it, the optimal level is less than 70 mg/dL.)

If your cholesterol levels are in an unhealthy range, Dr. Willke says to make positive lifestyle changes – like taking medications prescribed by your doctor, exercising or following a heart healthy diet – to get them down.

Tip #3: Lower Your Body Mass Index (BMI)

Being obese puts extra strain on your entire body, especially your heart. “Get down to your appropriate BMI, which would be no more than 25 for your particular age,” Dr. Willke points out.

Heart Attack & Heart Disease: Know the Symptoms

Can you recognize the symptoms of a heart attack or heart disease? A “movie heart attack” that depicts sudden, intense chest pain can happen — but it’s not always like that. Plus, the signs are often different in men and women. These are the most common symptoms that may occur in both:

- Uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing or pain in the chest lasting more than a few minutes.
- Chest discomfort with dizziness, fainting, sweating, nausea or shortness of breath.
- Unusual digestion.
- Chest pain that comes and goes.
- Pain between the shoulder blades.



Women often are more likely to dismiss symptoms and delay getting immediate assistance. Many times, they don’t experience any chest pressure. Instead, they might feel like they have the flu or may simply be short of breath. Other possible warning signs in women include:

- Discomfort in the lower chest
- Discomfort in the upper abdomen
- Pressure in the upper back
- Extreme fatigue
- Breaking out in a cold sweat
- Lightheadedness
- Jaw pain

If you or someone you know notices intense symptoms, don’t take chances: call 911 and seek immediate medical attention. The faster a heart attack is treated, the more likely the outcome will be positive.



What Happens during a Cardiac Stress Test?

High blood pressure, undefined chest pain or suffering a heart attack – among others heart issues – may warrant the need for a stress test.

A stress test is an assessment done in two parts. In a very controlled situation, the heart is stressed using either exercise on a treadmill or a chemical injection, depending on the status of the individual getting the test. Heart rate, rhythm, and blood pressure are continuously monitored throughout the entire exam.

During the second phase of the test, pictures are taken of the heart. These pictures are compared with pictures taken prior to the exercise portion. While the exercise stress test itself usually takes around 10 or 15 minutes, part one of the test takes about 30 or 45 minutes total.

Most doctors recommend fasting prior to a stress test and not taking any beta blockers, a type of drug used to treat high blood pressure, for 12 to 18 hours prior. These impact the heart rate and may cause inaccurate results. They also suggest these actions:

- Avoid caffeine prior to the test
- Wear shoes that are good for exercise
- Discuss any concerns you have with your technician before the test

Depending on the seriousness of any abnormalities found during the stress test, you may need to see a cardiologist the same day. If the test is normal, your physician will advise follow-up care to determine what else may be causing your discomforts.