

Heart Health Checklist for Women



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One of the most important and powerful organs in your body, your heart is essentially a muscle (a little larger than your fist) that is responsible for almost everything that gives your body life. As your heart pumps blood throughout your body, it beats approximately 72 times per minute of your life.

Because the foods you eat and your exercise and sleep habits can dramatically affect the overall health of your heart, doesn't it make sense to be as informed as possible about your heart health and what you can do to protect it?

Read on for heart-healthy steps you can take to help your heart keep taking care of you.



Eat healthfully.

Healthy eating can help you manage your weight and help prevent certain life-threatening conditions and diseases, such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, obesity, cancer and cardiovascular disease. So, how do you get started? Follow these simple guidelines:

1. Avoid processed and refined foods.

A quick rule of thumb: Shop the perimeter of your grocery store—the produce, dairy, meat and seafood departments. They're full of fresh, preservative-free whole foods. Avoid the middle of the store, where the packaged goods reside—products that contain harmful chemical additives, trans fats, salts, refined sugars, artificial ingredients and preservatives.

2. Limit sugar.

The American Heart Association recommends women consume no more than 6 teaspoons of sugar a day and men consume no more than 9 teaspoons a day, much less than the average American consumes. You can cut down on sugars by limiting sweets, including candy and sodas, but don't stop there. To satisfy a sweet tooth, grab a few red grapes, a square of dark chocolate (at least 70% cocoa) or a handful of homemade trail mix.

3. Load up on veggies.

The best way to eat healthy and achieve variety is to eat seasonally. Enjoy vitamin-rich root vegetables, such as beets, radishes, carrots and sweet potatoes, in the fall. Soak up power foods, such as green salads, succulent squash, ripe tomatoes, crunchy cucumbers, beans and corn in the summer. Year round, avoid store-bought salad dressings, which contain sugar and other additives. Instead, make your own dressings with olive oil, lemon juice and herbs.

4. Eat fresh fruits in moderation.

Many fruits are high in fiber and nutrients, but they also contain sugar. Eating too much fruit can lead to problems with the hormones that regulate blood sugar. Eat a variety of fruits in moderation as part of a broad, balanced diet.

5. Eat healthy fats.

Not all fats are created equal. Healthy fats are just that—good for you! You can get healthy fats from fish (choose those that are high in omega 3s, such as salmon, tuna, mackerel, herring and trout), nuts (almonds and walnuts) and seeds, avocados, oils (olive or coconut oil), dairy products (eggs, fat-free or low-fat milk or yogurt) and grass-fed beef.

6. Eat lean protein.

If you are a meat eater, choose lean cuts and trim excess fat before cooking. Avoid processed meats like cold cuts, bacon and sausage. Eat fish at least twice a week. Taco Tuesday? Try ground turkey or chicken instead of beef.

7. Say no to the salt shaker.

For some people, sodium increases blood pressure because it holds excess fluid in their bodies and places an added burden on their hearts. Blood pressure tends to rise with age. So, lowering your sodium intake now, regardless of your age, may help curb that rise and reduce your risk of developing conditions such as heart disease. Limit total daily salt intake to 2-2.5 grams per day. Avoid canned foods. Regardless of the kind of salt, whether regular, sea, Himalayan, pink or black, they all count as salt.

8. Keep an eye on portion size.

Eating healthy does not mean eating unlimited quantities. Healthy foods are good for you, but they still contain calories. Learn what your target caloric intake is for managing your weight, and understand the relative calorie content of the foods you eat. Use smaller plates to help reduce portion sizes.

9. Strive for progress, not perfection.

Changing eating habits takes time, and arming yourself with knowledge and resolve is a good first step. If you strive for perfection, you will only set yourself up for failure. Eating healthy is a way of life, not a diet. Celebrate incremental progress, and forgive the occasional slip-up.

10. Watch your alcohol consumption.

Women should consume no more than one alcoholic drink per day. Men should consume no more than two drinks per day (one drink = 4 oz. of wine, 1 oz. of liquor or 12 oz. of beer).



Get moving.

Regular exercise is an essential part of heart-healthy living. Before starting any new exercise regimen, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor. Here are six ways that regular exercise improves your heart health:

1. Exercise reduces your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Heart disease and stroke are the nation's No. 1 and No. 5 killers, respectively. To lower your risk, the American Heart Association recommends at least 150 minutes per week of moderate exercise or 75 minutes per week of vigorous exercise (or a combination of moderate and vigorous activity). This can be broken down to 30 minutes a day, five times a week. Strive for 7,000 to 10,000 steps a day. Know that exercise is cumulative over the day and doesn't have to be done in a 30-minute stretch.

2. Exercise helps you lose weight.

It's simple—the food you eat contains calories, and aerobic exercise burns calories. If the number of calories you burn (including the ones you burn while exercising) exceeds the number you take in, you can lose weight. Managing your weight is essential to good heart health. Being overweight has shown to put stress on your heart and increases your risk of heart disease.

3. Exercise makes you stronger.

Your heart is a muscle, and exercise builds strong muscles. A combination of aerobic exercise (walking, running, swimming) and strength training (weightlifting, resistance training) increases oxygen delivery to your muscles, lessening the burden on your heart to pump blood to the muscles.

4. Exercise lowers your blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

High blood pressure and cholesterol increase your risk of heart disease and stroke. The American Heart Association recommends 40 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise a week to get your numbers down.

5. Exercise reduces stress.

When your body is stressed, it releases the stress hormones adrenalin and cortisol. Chronic stress raises your heart rate and blood pressure, which is bad for your heart. Exercise can help you relax. As an added bonus, when you exercise, your body releases mood-enhancing endorphins.

6. Exercise can help you live longer.

Studies have shown a direct correlation between physical activity and lower mortality rates, with most studies showing a 30% to 60% lower mortality rate for people who are physically active versus those who are sedentary.



Get good sleep.

Sleeping is as essential to your health and well-being as are breathing, eating and drinking.

The importance of getting sufficient, quality sleep on a consistent basis cannot be overestimated. Your health, including your heart health, depends on it.

How much sleep we need varies by age. The National Institutes of Health suggests that school-age children need at least 10 hours of sleep daily, teens need 9 to 10 hours, and adults need 7 to 8 hours.

Here are a few tips for getting the quality sleep you need, consistently:

- Keep a regular sleeping schedule. Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, on both weekdays and weekends.
- Use the hour before bed to prepare. Turn off the TV, computer or smartphone. Take a hot bath, meditate or read quietly.
- Make sure your bedroom is a comfortable temperature, free of distracting light and noise.
- Avoid naps, especially in the afternoon.
- Avoid alcohol and heavy meals within a couple hours of bedtime.
- Limit your intake of caffeine, especially within eight hours of bedtime.
- Get plenty of exercise.

Quit smoking.

Quitting smoking can reduce your risk for heart disease, stroke and peripheral vascular disease. Memorial Hermann offers smoking cessation programs to help you quit. Visit

memorialhermann.org/services/tobacco-cessation

Know your numbers.



As part of a heart health evaluation, your doctor will likely measure these key predictors of increased risk for heart disease. If you do not have known heart disease, your goals are listed below. Your goals will be different if you have a heart condition. It's important to talk to your doctor.

- **Total Cholesterol Ideal:** Under 200 mg/dL
Controlling your cholesterol plays an important role in heart health. Your total cholesterol and HDL (good) cholesterol are among the many factors used to predict your lifetime or 10-year risk for a heart attack or stroke.
- **HDL (Good) Cholesterol Ideal:** Greater than 60 mg/dL
HDL cholesterol is called “good” cholesterol. A healthy HDL-cholesterol level may help protect against heart attack and stroke.
- **LDL (Bad) Cholesterol Ideal:** 100 mg/dL or lower
LDL is considered the “bad” cholesterol because it contributes to fatty buildups in arteries, which increases your risk of heart attack, stroke and peripheral artery disease. For heart health, you want your low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol level to be low.
- **Triglyceride to HDL Ratio Ideal:** Less than 2
Triglycerides are the most common type of fat in the body. An elevated triglycerides to HDL ratio can indicate increased cardiovascular risk.
- **Blood Pressure Ideal:** 120 mmHg/<80 mmHg
Your blood pressure should be regularly checked and regulated. High blood pressure, also called hypertension, can be affected by your weight. Excess fat increases the work your heart has to perform to pump blood throughout your body. Lowering your body weight by even as little as 5% to 10% can lower your blood pressure and increase your heart health.
- **Fasting Glucose Ideal:** Less than 100 mg/dL
High blood glucose can damage your blood vessels and the nerves that control your heart and blood vessels. Over time, this damage can lead to heart disease.
- **Body Mass Index (BMI) Ideal Range:** 18.5 to 25 kg/m²
BMI is an estimate of body fat and a good gauge of your risk for heart disease, as well as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, gallstones, breathing problems and certain cancers.

To learn more about women and heart disease, visit
[memorialhermann.org/womens-heart](https://www.memorialhermann.org/womens-heart)

To schedule an appointment, please contact us at
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