



### Ten Lifestyle Strategies for Promoting a Healthy Heart

February is Heart Month: a reminder to all that heart disease continues to be the leading cause of death in Canada. In fact, Statistics Canada reports there are an estimated 70,000 heart attacks each year in this country, and approximately 19,000 Canadians die each year as the result of a heart attack. The truth of the matter is that someone living in Canada will die from heart disease or stroke about every seven minutes.

Although we can't change some risk factors, such as age and heredity, many factors – including high cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity, and inactivity – can be modified, thus significantly lowering the risk of heart disease. And because lifestyle habits (e.g. diet, exercise, and appropriate supplementation) can strongly influence these modifiable risk factors, here are 10 lifestyle strategies you can implement to promote a healthy heart.

#### **1. Make more healthful food choices.**

One of the best weapons for fighting off heart disease is eating a healthful diet, particularly one rich in whole grains, legumes, fish, nonfat or low-fat dairy products, and plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Start making healthier food choices by choosing lean meats and poultry without the skin, and be sure to prepare them without added saturated and trans fats; selecting fat-free, 1% fat, or low-fat dairy products; limiting your consumption of foods containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oils to also lower the trans fats in your diet; watching your added sugar and salt intake; and remembering that if you drink alcohol, to do so in moderation. That means no more than one drink a day if you're a woman, and two drinks a day if you're a man.

#### **2. Lose the belly fat and keep it off.**

Having a wide girth, a beer belly, or an apple-shaped figure may mean you have large amounts of deep-hidden belly fat around your internal organs. This fat, also known as visceral fat, may in fact be the most dangerous fat you can have. It's been linked to high cholesterol, high insulin, high triglycerides, high blood pressure, and other health problems. The more belly fat you have, the higher your risk for developing heart disease or for having a stroke, but also for developing type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer. What makes belly fat so dangerous? Well, it seems to be the type of fat that goes straight to the liver to be metabolized into cholesterol. LDL ("bad") cholesterol circulates in the blood and contributes to the development of arterial plaque and narrowing of the arteries. Visceral fat also produces more inflammation in the body than fat found in other areas of the body. And inflammation is thought to play a key role in heart disease and a host of other chronic diseases. Studies have also shown that belly-fat cells produce more fibrinogen and plasminogen, two chemicals in the body that promote blood clotting. And, last but not least, visceral fat also produces more angiotensin, a hormone that causes blood vessels to constrict. Here again lies the connection between too much belly fat and an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure.

Lose the belly fat and keep it off by following a sensible weight-management program designed to preserve muscle mass while promoting fat loss, especially around the waist. Losing just 5% to 10% of your body weight can also significantly improve your blood cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood sugar levels.

### **3. Get more of the “sunshine” vitamin.**

Vitamin D, also known as the sunshine vitamin, is made in the body when the rays of the sun are absorbed by the skin. Health care professionals and nutrition research scientists have known for years that this vitamin is needed for the regulation of calcium and phosphorus to help build and maintain strong bones. But recent research indicates vitamin D may do much more than that. Adequate intake of vitamin D may reduce the risk of heart disease.

So what’s the connection between vitamin D and heart health? Well, for one, studies indicate that vitamin D deficiency is associated with increased cardiovascular risk, above and beyond established cardiovascular risk factors such as blood cholesterol and blood pressure. Of 1,739 Framingham Heart Study subjects, researchers found that those with blood levels of vitamin D below 15 ng/mL had twice the risk of suffering a cardiovascular event such as a heart attack, heart failure, or stroke in the next five years compared with those who showed higher levels of vitamin D. When researchers adjusted for traditional cardiovascular risk factors such as high cholesterol, diabetes, and high blood pressure, the risk remained significant, with a 62% greater risk of a cardiovascular event in participants with low levels of vitamin D compared with those with higher levels.

The current daily recommended dietary intake of vitamin D is 200 IU for everyone up to age 50, then 400 IU up to age 70, and 600 IU for those 70 and older. However, according to nutrition researchers, that may not be enough. Although how much is enough is still being debated, we may need three to four times more than what most people currently get. This applies especially if you get very little sun exposure, use sunscreen when you’re exposed to the sun, are elderly, or have a dark skin complexion. While 10 to 15 minutes a day of sun exposure can boost vitamin D levels in the body, very few foods in nature contain vitamin D. Fish (such as salmon, tuna, and mackerel) and cod liver oil are among the best sources. Small amounts of vitamin D also are found in beef liver, cheese, and egg yolks, but these foods also are high in fat and cholesterol. Fortified foods provide most of the vitamin D in the North American diet. For example, the Canadian milk supply is fortified with 100 IU per 250 mL. To play it safe, take a multivitamin/multimineral supplement with plenty of vitamin D each and every day. Look for a comprehensive formula with at least 400 IU to 1000 IU of vitamin D per daily dosage.

### **4. Go fishing with omega-3 fatty acids.**

You need a certain amount of oils and fats in your diet, as they supply calories and help our bodies absorb fat-soluble vitamins such as A, D, and E. It’s important to choose healthier unsaturated fats – also known as mono- and polyunsaturated fats – because eating too much and the wrong kinds of saturated and trans fats may raise the bad LDL cholesterol and lower the good HDL cholesterol, which can increase your risk of high blood pressure, narrowing of the arteries (atherosclerosis), heart attack, and stroke.

*Canada’s Food Guide* recommends that you include a small amount (30 mL to 45 mL) of mono- or polyunsaturated fat in your diet each day. One type of polyunsaturated fat is omega-3, which can help prevent clotting of blood, reducing the risk of stroke. It can also help lower triglycerides, a type of blood fat linked to heart disease. Among the best sources of omega-3 fat are cold water fish such as mackerel, sardines, herring, rainbow trout, and salmon. But how many of us consume enough of these sources, especially amid all the

concerns about heavy metal contamination and environmental pollutants in our fish supply? If you're not getting sufficient omega-3s from diet alone, take a highly-quality, ultra-pure fish oil supplement each day. Look for one that provides a daily dosage of one gram of omega-3 fatty acids high in eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), which are found in fish oil and believed to help to reduce risk factors for heart disease, including high levels of triglycerides and high blood pressure.

#### **5. Protect your body against free radicals and oxidative stress.**

Atherosclerosis is a chronic, progressive disease in which plaques (consisting of deposits of cholesterol and other lipids, calcium, and large inflammatory cells called macrophages) build up in the walls of arteries. Over time, these plaques can lead to a complete obstruction to blood flow or suddenly rupture, causing a blood clot to form and leading to a total blockage of the artery. The development of atherosclerosis is complicated, but the primary event seems to be repeated, subtle injury to the artery's wall through various mechanisms. These mechanisms include physical (e.g., chronic high blood pressure) and inflammatory stresses involving the immune system, certain infections, or chemical abnormalities in the bloodstream (e.g., high cholesterol or diabetes). However, some researchers believe that oxidative stress and free radical damage to the walls of blood vessels is the initial insult that causes this disease. Many nutrients such as vitamins C and E, and the mineral selenium, are potent antioxidants that work to prevent the oxidation of LDL cholesterol and scavenge free radicals, so getting adequate amounts of these nutrients is another important strategy for promoting cardiovascular health. Consuming more foods rich in these nutrients – such as citrus fruit, strawberries, and potatoes for vitamin C, and nuts and seeds for vitamin E and selenium – is a good place to start. To be sure you're getting enough on a daily basis, don't forget to take a comprehensive multivitamin/multimineral supplement that includes these important antioxidant nutrients.

#### **6. Boost your phytonutrient intake.**

Eat your fruit and vegetables; they're good for you! Population studies from around the world suggest that diets rich in fruit and vegetables protect against heart disease, cancer, and other chronic diseases. The goodness of these foods comes not only from the essential nutrients they contain but also from the array of phytonutrients they provide. These phytonutrients impart the tastes, aromas, and colours of food. They also have profound physiological effects in the body, acting as antioxidants and anti-inflammatory agents, mimicking hormones, and suppressing the development of disease. Scientific research has revealed that phytonutrients called flavonoids (resveratrol, catechins, and ellagic acid) may act as potent antioxidants, inhibit inflammation, and help slow down cellular aging. Another class of phytonutrients – the carotenoids lutein, lycopene, and beta-carotene – also exerts potent antioxidant activity, possibly helping reduce the risk of heart disease and other conditions such as age-related eye disease and cancer.

#### **7. Fill up on fibre.**

Another reason a diet rich in fruit, vegetables, and whole grains is associated with a decreased risk of disease is that these foods are also a great source of dietary fibre. There are two types of fibre in foods, and we need both. Insoluble fibre, found in the outer layer of grains such as wheat bran, promotes a healthy digestive system and colon health. Heart health benefits come from soluble fibre, the type of fibre found in oats and apples. Increasing soluble fibre intake helps lower blood cholesterol and blood sugar levels. So strive to get your seven to 10 servings (teens and adults; four to six servings for children) of fruit and vegetables each day.

### **8. Find a friend in Coenzyme Q<sub>10</sub>.**

Coenzyme Q<sub>10</sub> (CoQ<sub>10</sub>) is a fat-soluble, vitamin-like substance found in every human cell. It's involved in key biochemical reactions that produce energy in cells. It also acts as an antioxidant, working with vitamins E and C to protect cells against oxidative stress and free radical damage. Although the body is capable of making its own CoQ<sub>10</sub>, production slows as we age. Cholesterol-lowering medications (e.g., statins) also block the body's ability to make CoQ<sub>10</sub>, and supplementation has been shown in clinical studies to improve cardiac function in people with existing heart conditions such as congestive heart failure. Although CoQ<sub>10</sub> can be found in foods such as fatty fish, liver, and whole grains, it makes good sense to take a CoQ<sub>10</sub> supplement daily, especially if you're at risk for heart disease, or take cholesterol-lowering medication.

### **9. Get moving.**

Physical inactivity is a risk factor for developing heart disease, and research studies indicate that more than 60% of adults don't engage in the recommended amount of regular physical activity. In fact, 25% of all adults aren't active at all. If you're one of them, it's time to get moving. Regular physical activity promotes a healthy heart in so many ways: it helps lower blood pressure and cholesterol, helps control weight, reduces anxiety, and improves blood circulation. Do your heart a favour and try to get 30 minutes of physical activity most days of the week. If you haven't been active for some time, or have a chronic health problem such as existing heart disease, diabetes, or obesity, be sure to consult your physician before beginning a new exercise program.

### **10. Take time to de-stress.**

There's no denying we live in a stressful world, and most of us experience stress on a daily basis. Whether it's physical or emotional stress, your body reacts in the same way: it sets off its "fight or flight" response. As a result, stress hormones are released, increasing blood pressure, heart rate, and blood glucose in an attempt to provide our body with an increased energy supply. Over time, this chronic stress response wreaks havoc: slowing digestion, weakening immune function, and increasing the risk of heart disease and other chronic conditions. Take time, then, to de-stress your life. Start by getting more sleep and ending those unhealthy habits such as smoking, drinking too much, and overeating. Think about what you truly must get done, set priorities, and learn to say no. And, finally, don't forget to exercise (a great stress reducer) and incorporate relaxation and deep-breathing techniques into your daily routine. Your heart will love you for it.

Be well.



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