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6 Dietary and Lifestyle Strategies to Promote Heart Health

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February is National Heart Health Month and this year we are honoring it by sharing 6 dietary and lifestyle strategies you can incorporate into your daily life to promote heart health. According to the American Heart Association, nearly half of Americans are living with heart disease based on a 2016 report. Although genetics contribute 30% to disease development, our lifestyle behaviors contribute ~40% of overall health. This statistic tells us we have an opportunity to choose health-promoting behaviors to support our longevity. At God's Love, our Registered Dietitian Nutritionists are dedicated to educating our community regarding disease prevention.

Below are 6 simple dietary and lifestyle strategies that have been proven to promote heart health.

Eat More Plants

Research continues to strongly support plant-based diets, such as the Mediterranean diet, the DASH diet, vegetarian & vegan diets, significantly reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. These diets are 70% identical, with the common denominator being high intakes of fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. Diets high in plants help to reduce blood pressure, plaque formation and lower cholesterol levels which are all factors that can increase the risk of a cardiovascular event, such as heart attacks and/or strokes.

Focus on Nutrient-Rich Foods

Beware of the differences between whole food vegan diets versus processed food vegan diets. You can technically stick to a vegan diet by just eating Oreos, Cheetos, Pepsi, and other highly-processed foods; but it's not the elimination of animal products that make vegan so beneficial, rather it's the replacement of animal products with nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains.

Switch to Lean Protein

Research continues to strongly suggest diets high in red meat and saturated fats are linked to an increased risk of plaque formation and high cholesterol levels. Therefore, it is suggested to limit intake or choosing lean options. We recommended consuming more fish, poultry, and plant-based proteins such as soy, nuts, seeds, legumes, and beans as your primary source of protein. The omega-3s in fish and walnuts, as well as the vitamin and minerals found in legumes and beans, can also be an effective way to reduce cholesterol levels.

Budget for Healthy Eating

If we're going to improve our eating habits, we need to eliminate any barrier that may stop us short of our goal, and one of the most frequently reported barriers to eating fruits and vegetables on a regular basis, is cost. Eating more plants doesn't have to break the bank. By simply planning ahead one can improve diet quality without increasing cost. The following tips can promote healthy eating on a budget.

1. **Do NOT shop hungry** – Have a healthy snack before you get to the store and plan by creating a list.
2. **Learn to read ALL the labels** – Use the shelf tag for the cost per unit as a resource to determine which item gives you the most bang for your buck. Sometimes a 32oz container of yogurt is cheaper per unit ounce than individual 6oz containers.
3. **Reduce waste** – Don't buy perishable food in bulk if you don't have a plan to use it all before it may spoil. Utilize your freezer to store some fruits and vegetables to extend shelf life. Buying fruits and vegetables already frozen can be just as good as buying them fresh.
4. **Get your protein** – Eating more plant-based proteins like beans, legumes, tofu, and nut butter is a cost-efficient way to stretch your money. Also consider buying canned meats like chicken, salmon, and tuna.
5. **Keep it simple** – Don't over complicate your recipes with a ton of ingredients. Stick to your favorite sauces, herbs, and spices that are versatile in many different types of recipes. Repurpose leftovers by tossing them in rice bowls, for example.
6. **"Health" foods allowed, but not required** – Organic junk food is still junk food. Don't go crazy on buying "superfoods" like goji berries or matcha powders if you can't afford it. A well-balanced diet is more important.

Get Moving

Physical activity is critical for a long, healthy, independent life. Research shows even 20 minutes of physical activity a day can reduce your risk of heart disease. [Dr. Jonathan Whiteson](#), a Cardio-Pulmonary Rehabilitation specialist at NYU Langone, workout prescription is FITT: frequency, intensity, type, and time.

- **Frequency:** 3-5 days of aerobic exercise and 2-3 times per week of resistance training. But of course, anything is better than nothing!
- **Intensity:** There are many equations to measure your ideal heart rate but keep it simple. Aim to be at a level in between comfortable breathing and gasping for air. You should be able to hold a conversation during your workout with a couple of breathing breaks in between. The more vigorous your exercise, the better.
- **Type:** Adding a variety of different workouts not only helps to minimize boredom but also strengthens ALL parts of the body. Dr. Whiteson recommends including aerobic (like cardio), muscle toning (like resistance training), flexibility (like yoga), functional, and goal specific.
- **Time:** The current exercise recommendation for Americans is 120 minutes per week. But Dr. Whiteson points out, this is actually the recommended minimum. He suggests for maximum benefits to double it and aim for 300 minutes per week. That breaks down to one hour, five days a week.

Get a Good Night's Rest

Studies have shown, sleeping less than 6 hours can increase your risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity by 50%. Sleep is

important since it's the only way your body can "reset" itself, this influences the production of many hormones, specifically the hormones that regulate hunger. The recommended sleep sweet spot is between 7-8 hours. Keep in mind you can't cheat and catch up on the weekends. Our bodies are unable to "catch-up" on sleep. Sleep benefits come from consistent nightly sleep. Creating a bed time ritual by eliminating screen time can help signal to the brain sleep is approaching and induce release of melatonin, a natural sleep aid hormone.

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