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5 STEPS TO A HEALTHY HEART

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by

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INTRODUCTION

As a nation and, in fact, as an entire species, our health care concerns throughout 2020 were all focused on the Coronavirus pandemic. From early spring, we were confronted with daily reports from around the globe about the spread of the disease. As quarantines and economic shutdowns developed around the world, it became all the more **difficult to go through a single day without dealing in some way with COVID-19.**

Though anxiety about this disease continues to be high and the fatality toll is abysmal, what seems to be lost in all the concern about Coronavirus is that it is not now and at no point has it ever been the number one threat to human mortality. Through all the fervor, **heart disease continues to claim more American lives than any other illness.**



Health care providers have repeatedly expressed frustration with the public throughout the pandemic. They remind us constantly that there are a few simple things we can do to **minimize our risk of contracting the disease.** Ironically, the same is true when it comes to our heart health. As a society, we do a very poor job of caring for our hearts—an oversight that can take years off of our lives.

In this book, we'll list **five simple steps that you can take to do your part in reversing this deadly trend.** We'll look at how to evaluate our heart's health. We'll reflect on the proactive steps we can take to make sure our hearts have the nutrition and exercise they need. We'll not only discuss those practices and substances that might be harmful to the heart but also **how to let go of bad heart habits** that we might really enjoy. Finally, we'll talk about you talking to your medical provider. These are simple steps that can give our hearts a break and extend our lives.

Evaluating the Health of Your Heart

“Ignorance is bliss,” as the proverb goes. Ignorance can also be deadly.

The first step in achieving and maintaining a healthy heart is evaluating the condition of your heart as it is. This is not something that requires elaborate tests or intrusive procedures. Rather, a quick check of certain factors will give you a heads-up in regard to your likelihood of developing heart issues.

HERE IS A LIST OF FIVE FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN EVALUATING YOUR RISK OF DEVELOPING HEART TROUBLE:

BLOOD PRESSURE	Blood pressure is a “silent killer” because it seldom reveals any symptoms as it quickly undermines our circulatory systems. Do you frequently check your blood pressure? Is it regularly in a normal range?
LIPIDS	Triglycerides and cholesterol must be kept at acceptable levels, else they contribute to the buildup of plaque in our blood vessels, especially in the coronary arteries. What did your last lipid panel show?
WEIGHT	Two out of three American adults are overweight or obese. This contributes to a multitude of health problems, including heart disease. What is your Body Mass Index (BMI)?
BLOOD SUGAR	Elevated blood glucose leads to a host of problems, among them, putting an extra burden on our hearts. What is your A1C?
ABUSE FACTORS	To what extent do you avoid tobacco, excessive consumption of alcohol, constant stress, and a sedentary lifestyle?

As you reflect honestly on this list of five risk factors, you can evaluate whether or not your heart is at a heightened degree of risk for facing cardiac issues. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that **almost half of all Americans (47%) possess one or more of these conditions, putting them at a higher risk of heart disease.**

#2

Adjust Your Diet

As we reflect on how to keep our hearts healthy, another old proverb comes to mind: “The best exercise you can get is pushing yourself away from the dinner table.” If only it were that simple. As stated, **two of every three Americans carry extra weight**—weight that burdens our hearts. This we know. What we need is a successful way to deal with eating, nutrition, and weight management.

FORTUNATELY, NO LESS AN AUTHORITY THAN THE MAYO CLINIC SUGGESTS EIGHT STEPS THAT WILL LEAD TO NEW EATING HABITS AND A HEALTHY HEART:

PORTION CONTROL	Start by using a smaller plate—really! Use those measuring cups in the cupboard to portion out how much you eat and have only one serving. At restaurants, split meals with others or bring half the entrée home in a box.
FRUITS & VEGETABLES	Your heart will love you for increasing these. They are a fresh source of the most important vitamins and minerals your heart and circulatory system needs. If you use canned products, go with low-sodium varieties that are packed in water.
WHOLE GRAINS	When you choose whole grains, it helps regulate your blood pressure and heart function. Plus, there are many grains you may never have tried: farro, quinoa, or barley.
CHOOSE GOOD FATS	Avoid trans fats and limit saturated fats. Your better oils are monounsaturated fats (olive or coconut oil) and polyunsaturated fats (avocados, nuts, seeds).
LOW-FAT PROTEIN	Opt for lean meats, poultry, and fish (especially cold-water fish like salmon and mackerel). Protein is also found in low-fat dairy products, beans, peas, and lentils. Black beans can make a mean burger.
LESS SALT	The American Heart Association recommends the average adult have no more than a teaspoon of salt a day. Watch out for the extra sodium in prepared canned foods, condiments, and restaurant cuisine.

MAKE A MENU

Using the ideas expressed above, make plans for a week's worth of meals. This takes practice because it's so easy to get distracted. Don't get discouraged. Keep trying.

SO, INDULGE YOURSELF

When you've done well for several days in a row, give yourself a treat. Just don't make it a habit.



So often, when we launch a new initiative to improve our health, we look at it as being more punishment or harsh restriction than being a new adventure that will enrich our lives with surprising benefits. The key is to **strike out and try some totally new dishes** or foods prepared in ways that are new to you.

The Cleveland Clinic's cardiology dietitian Julia Zumpan, RD, LD, says, "Try to eat foods that are in their natural form, as they come from the ground. . . . There is a great variety of fruits and vegetables that are good for your heart. . . . You can definitely reduce your risk of developing cardiovascular disease by eating certain foods every day."¹

Among the foods Zumpan suggests are some real surprises, like dark chocolate. The higher the percentage of cocoa (that is, the darker it is), the less sweet it is and the more fiber and protein it contains. How about a glass of red wine? One glass for women and up to two for men can improve cholesterol.

Then there are some tasty fruits for you to try: oranges, papaya, and cantaloupes. You may try giving a second look to soy, which comes in several forms. Try edamame beans or marinated tofu. While you're at it, check out some seeds you may have overlooked: flaxseeds and chia are amazingly nutritious and can be prepared in a great variety of ways.



#3

Adjust Your Activities—with Some Exercise

When you get down to brass tacks, the heart is a muscle. Every muscle in the body benefits when exercised properly and the heart is certainly no exception.

THERE ARE THREE BASIC TYPES OF EXERCISE THAT ARE BENEFICIAL TO THE HEART:

1. AEROBICS CONDITIONING

- By improving circulation and expanding oxygenated blood throughout the body, **aerobic exercises lower blood pressure and heart rate** as well as improving overall conditioning. It also helps regulate blood glucose.
- It's suggested that you engage in aerobic exercise five days a week for at least 30 minutes.
- You can achieve this through swimming, walking, jogging, skipping rope, or a continually active sport like tennis.



2. STRENGTH TRAINING

- This helps transform body fat into lean muscle. Combined with aerobics, it dramatically **improves cholesterol levels**. Because it strengthens bones, this type of training is essential for achieving long-term exercise goals.
- Resistance training is recommended for at least two non-consecutive days a week.
- Strength training can be accomplished through the use of free weights, weight machines, or resistance exercises like pull up, chin-ups, squats, and so forth.



3. FLEXIBILITY AND BALANCE

- Flexibility, balance, and stretching exercises—like resistance training—have less direct impact on the heart but are directly responsible for making your body capable of continual exercise. These exercises **free you from joint pain and cramps and dramatically improve your balance, helping to prevent falls.** Among older adults, falls are the leading cause of trips to the hospital and the leading cause of accidental death.
- It's recommended that flexibility, stretching, and balancing exercises be employed daily and especially prior to or after other types of exercise.
- A multitude of balance, flexibility, and stretching regimens are readily available online. You may also consider yoga, Tai Chi, and Pilates training.

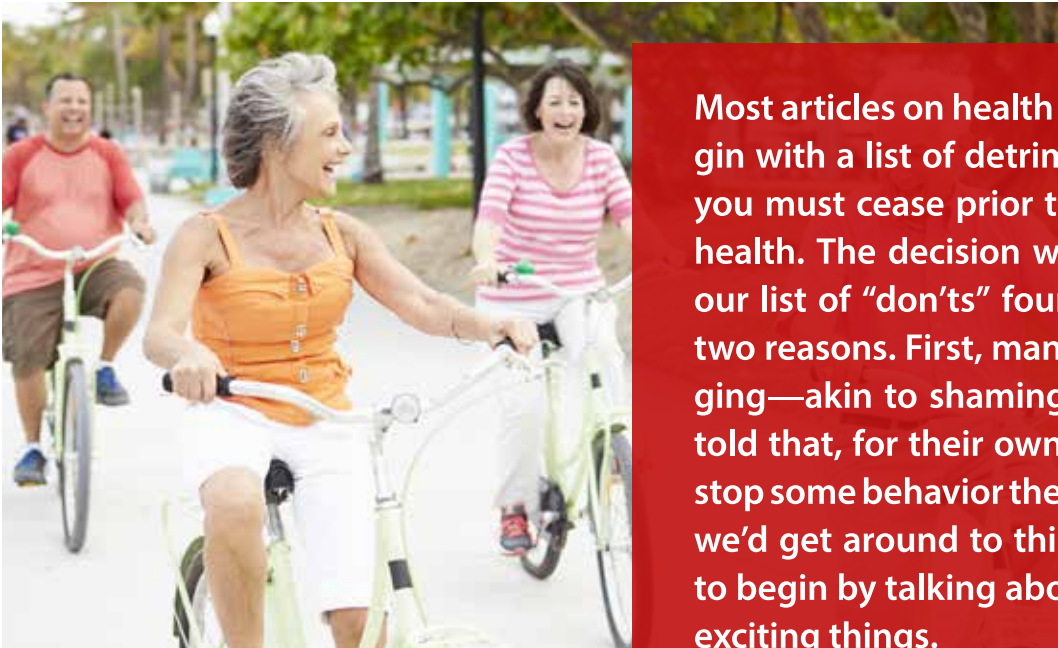


In regard to these three varieties of exercises, Dr. Kerry J. Stewart, an exercise physiologist with Johns Hopkins, says, "Aerobic exercise and resistance training are the most important for heart health. Although flexibility doesn't contribute directly to heart health, it's nevertheless important because it provides a good foundation for performing aerobic and strength exercises more effectively."²



#4

Drop Your Bad Habits



Most articles on health improvement begin with a list of detrimental things that you must cease prior to improving your health. The decision was made to place our list of “don’ts” fourth out of five for two reasons. First, many find it discouraging—akin to shaming—when they are told that, for their own good, they must stop some behavior they enjoy. You knew we’d get around to this, we just wanted to begin by talking about some positive, exciting things.

Second, there is a truism—a proverb—often repeated among those who are working to make changes in some of their underlying actions: **“The best way to get rid of a bad habit is to replace it with a good one.”** As we’ve discussed some positive steps you can take to safeguard the health of your heart, you may have already perceived how you might replace some of your current behaviors with those that are preferable and even lifesaving. That said, what sort of things do you need to give up for the sake of your heart?

In order of priority, here are the five behaviors that most put you at risk for heart disease: **smoking, living a sedentary lifestyle, being overweight, having a poor diet, and drinking alcohol excessively.** If any of these characteristics describe you, you may be tempted to ask, “Well, really, how much am I going to increase my risk of cardiac troubles just because I carry a few extra pounds and smoke once in a while?”

Actually, you put yourself at a much greater risk if you employ these particular behaviors. One study in Great Britain, conducted over a 20-year period, found that **having just one of those bad habits made you 89% more likely to die of heart disease** than an average person. If you engaged in up to four of these negative behaviors, your likelihood of dying increased by 349%. So, it’s definitely worth it to change your lifestyle a bit.



The problem is, how do we make those changes we know to be necessary? Fortunately, in that regard, we have some wisdom to share from a counselor, Teri Goetz with Psychology Today.

SHE HAS A LIST OF 10 SUGGESTED TIPS FOR HOW TO GET RID OF THESE HABITS THAT ARE SLOWLY KILLING US:

#1 Figure out what you want to change. It's not enough to say vaguely, "I don't want to live a sedentary life." Instead, decide exactly what you need to give up—the couch, the remote, and your BFF bag of potato chips.

#2 Ask what you're getting out of the old habit. Your negative habit must serve you in some way or you wouldn't have pursued it as long as you have.

#3 Respect your insight. On some level, you've already told yourself that this habit isn't just negative, it's deadly. You can say that out loud, you know.

#4 Decide how to replace the old habit. Make a plan for what new behaviors you'll institute in place of the old ones.

#5 Watch out for triggers. Bad habits are really rituals. They follow a set pattern, like a little pathway. Discern that path, so you'll recognize it from the first step.

#6 See yourself living out the new behaviors. Every athlete, dancer, or actor knows you have to practice your new routine—first in your mind, then in reality.

#7 Rewrite your negative scripts. Chances are, you'll beat yourself up verbally for your shortcomings. So, create some new internal scripts: "Yes, I was lazy about getting up to exercise. Still, that was the first time in a week I missed and I enjoy it when I do exercise."

#8 Small steps are still steps. Living up to your intention of removing an old, bad habit with a new, constructive habit may not happen all at once. Remember, incremental changes are real changes and you can keep adding to them. No champion marathon runner ever started out running 26.2 miles the first day.

#9 Know that you'll stumble. Old habits don't want to die and they will fight back. Remember, though, anybody who can have a bad habit can also have a good one.

#10 Give yourself time. Impatience is as harmful an enemy as any bad habit you ever had.

#5

Stay in Touch with Your Medical Provider



As you go through the process of overcoming challenges to your heart's health, it is enormously important for you to stay in close touch with your health care provider. There are a couple of significant reasons for this.

First, if you aren't doing as well in controlling your risk factors as you wish and intend, you might be a little embarrassed. Maybe you told the doctor you'd lose 15 pounds and instead you gained five. This may make you want to avoid your provider. Instead, this is all the more reason to be engaged with your health care team. That five pounds you gained might not be an absence of willpower but, instead, an undiagnosed health condition that needs to be treated. **Rather than thinking of your provider as a judgmental authority, consider her or him to be an essential member of the team that is trying to get you well and keep you well.**

Sometimes, on the other hand, folks who have been doing particularly well in overcoming heart health risk factors decide they no longer need the oversight of a provider because they're well. This dynamic is akin to the patient who takes half of a round of antibiotics and stops taking the medicine when he or she starts to feel better—then wonders why the illness comes back with a vengeance.

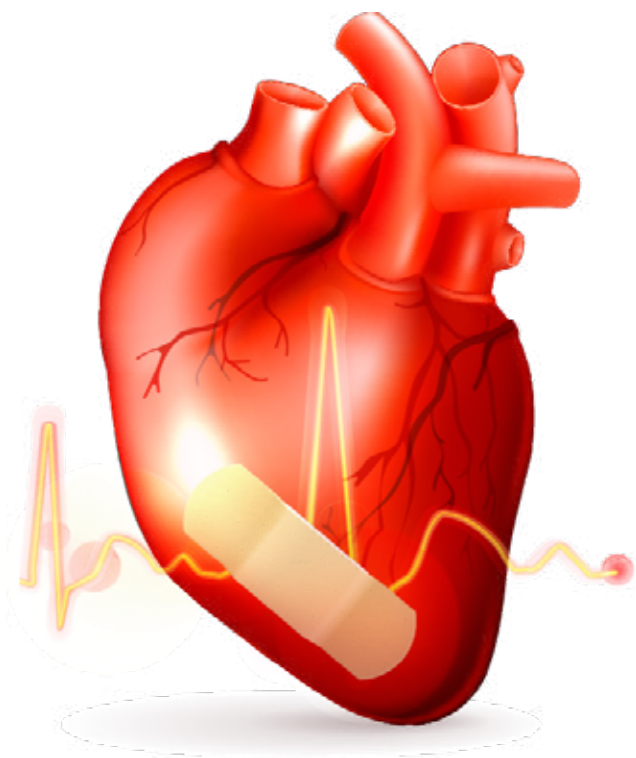
If you have at any point been concerned about your heart or any potential risk factor, that is an indication that **your health needs the continual oversight of a health care professional.** Blood chemistry can change unaccountably over surprisingly short periods of time, even in people who have decided that they're totally healthy. Let your provider be the one who says, "You're doing great. We don't need to see you for a year!"

SUMMARY

The preponderance of heart disease and the reality that it is the number one cause of death among Americans is prima facie evidence that the way we live as a society places too great a burden on our hearts. While science has not yet told us how long the human body can last, we do know that the improper treatment of our bodies—especially our hearts—can cut our lives short by decades.



The irony of this truth is that every one of us has it within our power to change the way we live so that our hearts experience better nutrition, better exercise, dependable healthcare oversight, and relief from those substances and behaviors that attack and damage our hearts.



The repair of damaged hearts through means of bypass surgery, stents, valve replacements, constantly evolving medicines, and dynamic tests has skyrocketed dramatically in the last half-century. In the 1970s, patients undergoing cardiac bypass were told they had less than a 50% chance of survival. In the 2020s, this surgery is virtually as safe as an appendectomy and perhaps every bit as common.

While medical practitioners are to be applauded for the great, life-saving advances in cardiac care and rehabilitation, these advances might be much less necessary if we as a society learn to take care of our hearts in such a way that they do not endure damage and need to be fixed. **These five simple steps may lead the way for those who truly desire to live lengthy lives with a healthy heart.**



WHY CHOOSE PUREHEALTH RESEARCH?

These modern times bombard you with stress and surround you with toxins. And that takes a toll on your body over time. These show up as aging skin, aches and pains, out-of-control inflammation, and disease. Your body needs hundreds of micronutrients to conduct thousands of metabolic reactions every single day. Diet, toxic load, medications, and poor absorption are just a few reasons why your body may not be receiving these building blocks of genuine healing.

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