

An Easy Approach to a Heart-Healthy Lifestyle  
By: Robert Kowalski

Not too many years ago, medical authorities believed that it would take major diet and exercise changes to protect against heart disease. Today we know that a heart-healthy lifestyle is actually easier than ever before.

When it comes to diet, the only thing we really need to cut way back on are saturated fats and trans-fatty acids. Choose low-fat or nonfat dairy foods including milk, yogurt, cheese, and ice cream. We don't have to give up red meats; simply select lean cuts of beef with the words "round" or "loin" in their names and pork loin or tenderloin and ham.

Read ingredient labels for "partially hydrogenated" oils that result in the trans-fatty acids that not only raise the bad LDL cholesterol but also lower the protective HDL cholesterol. Look for reformulated products including crackers, margarines, and other processed foods with labels announcing "No Trans Fats."

The flipside of the coin is that there are many foods that actually protect our hearts. Every diet should include lots and lots of fruits and vegetables, at least five servings a day. The more of those foods men and women eat, research show, the less the chance of suffering a heart attack or stroke. The same goes for whole grain breads and cereals.

Foods rich in soluble fiber actively lower cholesterol levels. You have many choices: oatmeal, oat bran, dried beans of all sorts, barley, and figs. One day you might have oat bran muffins for breakfast and the next day it could be chili for dinner, made with two cans of chili beans instead of just one. And maybe some dried figs for a snack.

And speaking of snacks, today we know that those who regularly enjoy a handful of nuts (about an ounce or so) are more protected against heart disease than those who avoid nuts, even if the total fat in their diet is higher. Almonds, walnuts, pecans, peanuts, all are good for you.

Consider yourself really lucky if you're a fish lover. Fish are rich in the omega-3 fatty acids, which tend to prevent formation of blood clots. Salmon, herring, mackerel, and other fatty fishes are best. And if you hate fish, consider a supplement that provides 1000mg of the omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA.

While shopping, look for foods that have been supplemented with the plant sterols called phytosterols. Those plant sterols are another natural way to lower cholesterol levels. For example, the CoroWise™ brand of plant sterols are appearing on many new consumer products.

Diet books come and go, but our problems with overweight and obesity continue to grow. The best solution is a diet that you can live and enjoy for the rest of your life. Simply cut back on the calories from excessive fats and carbohydrate-rich foods that provide little or

no nutrition, including white bread, rice, pasta, and snack and dessert foods. And burn some extra calories by increasing your physical activities daily.

Speaking of that, most men and women – and even children – fall into the couch potato category. Modern sedentary lifestyles not only lead to weight gain but also are considered a major risk factor for heart disease.

But, here too, getting the physical activity we need is easier than most folks believe. Simply enough, the old adage of “No pain, no gain” is out the window. A heart-healthy lifestyle calls for about 30 minutes of brisk activity daily.

You don’t even need to do the whole 30 minutes at one time. It all adds up throughout the day. So take a 15-minute walk during your lunch break and another one at the end of the day, for example.

The secret to success in sticking with a resolution to get more exercise is to choose activities you actually enjoy. That might be riding a bike, going for a weekend hike, swimming some laps in the pool, gardening, or dancing. An hour of swing, folk, or square dancing can be as good for the heart as an hour of jogging. Plan some activities with your spouse or with a friend. There’s nothing like some good company and conversation to make the time fly and make you look forward to the next outing.

You’ll find that as you get more physical, you’ll sleep better, be more productive at work, enjoy life more, and – here’s a mighty important benefit – cope with stress more efficiently.

Everyone has stress in his or her life. We can’t simply run away from it all. And stress, and emotional distress, have been strongly linked to heart disease risk. But there are ways of dealing with it.

In addition to daily exercise, start practicing the ancient art of deep breathing. Take a few minutes a day and actually pay attention to deeply breathing in and out, in and out. For best results, do so with your eyes closed, in a darkened, quiet room. Turn those moments into “mini-vacations” by thinking of places you love: the beach, the mountains, a fishing stream, and the golf course.

Then when the going gets rough, get away by going to that “better place” where life is simpler and more enjoyable. This takes practice. The more you do it, the better you’ll get at it.

I began my personal fight against heart disease, including all the lifestyle changes above, more than 20 years ago after undergoing a second coronary bypass surgery. My motivation was to stay alive to be the best Dad I could be for my children, who were very young at the time.

My goal was achieved, and my son and daughter are now grown. Now I look forward to some day playing with my grandchildren. And, in the meantime, I'm enjoying life to the fullest, feeling more robust energy and vitality all because of those simple lifestyle changes.

There's an old saying that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Take that first step today. You and those who love you will be glad that you did.

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