

## FEBRUARY:

### ♠ HEART ♠ HEALTH ♠ MONTH ♠

Each month, a variety of health topics or health concerns are recognized through annual health observance dates. Health observances are days, weeks, or months devoted to promoting particular health concerns, or to honor healthcare professionals. It is very fitting that in February, the month honoring St. Valentine, we focus on heart health!

The normal heart is a strong, hard-working pump made of muscle. About the size of a person's fist, the heart has blood vessels that provide the heart muscle with the blood supply it needs to be healthy and work hard, pumping blood throughout the body to "feed" our organs with nutrition (absorbed from the digestive tract) and oxygen (collected as blood circulates through the lungs). Without a strong, healthy heart, the whole body suffers....

#### ♠ RISK FACTORS FOR HEART DISEASE ♠

Extensive studies have identified factors that increase the risk of heart disease and heart attacks. The American Heart Association offers the following information about factors that can be modified, treated or controlled, and those that can't...

##### **Risk factors that can't be changed....**

Increasing age: over 83% of people who die of heart disease are 65 years of age or older. At older ages, women who have heart attacks are more likely than men to die within a few weeks of the attack.

Male gender: men have a greater risk of heart attack than women do, and they have attacks earlier in life. Even after menopause, when a woman's risk of death from heart disease increases, it is not as great as men's.

Heredity: children of parents with heart disease are more likely to develop it themselves. African Americans have more severe high blood pressure than Whites, and a higher risk of heart disease. Heart disease risk is also higher among Mexican Americans, American Indians, native Hawaiians and some Asian Americans. This is partly due to higher rates of obesity and diabetes.

##### **Risk factors that can be controlled or treated...**

Tobacco smoke: smokers' risk of developing heart disease is 2-4 times higher than nonsmokers. Smokers have about twice the risk of sudden cardiac death as nonsmokers with heart disease. (People who smoke cigars or pipes also have increased risk of heart attacks and strokes, but not as great as cigarette smokers.) Exposure to other people's smoke (second-hand smoke) increases the risk of heart disease even for nonsmokers.

High cholesterol: as cholesterol rises, so does risk of heart disease. When other risk factors (e.g., high blood pressure, smoking) are also present, the risk increases even more. Cholesterol levels are also affected by age, sex, heredity and diet.

High blood pressure: high blood pressure increases the heart's workload, causing the heart muscle to become thicker and stiffer. It increases your risk of stroke, heart attack, kidney failure and congestive heart failure. When high blood pressure is added to risks such as obesity, smoking, high cholesterol or diabetes, the risk of heart attack and stroke is even greater!

Physical activity: an inactive "couch potato" lifestyle is dangerous at all ages – regular, moderate-to-vigorous activity helps prevent heart and blood vessel disease, as well as control cholesterol levels, diabetes and obesity, and blood pressure.

Obesity/overweight: people who have excess body fat – especially if a lot of it is at the waist – are more likely to develop heart disease and stroke even if they have no other risk factors. Extra weight increases the heart's work, raises blood pressure, cholesterol, triglycerides, and increases risk of developing diabetes.

Diabetes: diabetes seriously increases your risk of heart disease; even when glucose levels are under control, diabetes increases the risk of heart disease and stroke (about three-quarters of people with diabetes die of some form of heart or blood vessel disease). It's extremely important to work with your healthcare professional to control diabetes and any other risk factors that you can!

#### ♠ LEARN AND LIVE™ ♠

The American Heart Association and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute have launched an educational campaign to increase peoples awareness of heart attacks (and strokes), and the importance of calling 9-1-1 immediately at the first sign of heart attack symptoms....

##### **Warning signs of heart attack**

Chest discomfort: pain in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back

Discomfort in other areas of upper body: pain in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach

Shortness of breath: may occur with or without chest pain

Other signs: may include breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea, lightheadedness or extreme tiredness

##### **Warning signs of stroke**

Sudden numbness or weakness of face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body

Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding

Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes

Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination

Sudden, severe headache with no known cause

##### **Calling 9-1-1**

If you or someone you're with has one or more of the signs of heart attack or stroke, don't wait longer than a few minutes before calling for help. Call 9-1-1... get to a hospital right away! If you can't access 9-1-1, have someone drive you to the hospital right away!

For more information, go to [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org) or contact your local chapter of the American Heart Association

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