

# 7 Steps to Better Heart Health

Get educated, manage your diet and more.

By Jennifer Brullo, Contributor Feb. 22, 2019, at 6:00 a.m.



Heart disease is the leading killer of both men and women in the U.S. (ISTOCKPHOTO)

**AS THE FOCUS OF HEALTH** care increasingly shifts from acute, episodic care delivery – a visit to the doctor, clinic or hospital – over to daily wellness management for chronic conditions, patients and family members have become crucial partners in their own health care. Nowhere is this more important for millions of Americans than in the area of heart health.

[Heart disease](#) is the leading killer of both men and women in this country, and heart health has long been a major focus of the medical community. But these days, with nearly half of all American adults living with some form of cardiovascular disease, it is vital for all of us to understand what causes risks to heart health, how to minimize those risks and, once they've been diagnosed, how to manage chronic heart conditions day in and day out.

At Partners in Care, the home care organization where I work, and its affiliate, the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, our clinicians, health coaches and home health aides visit at-risk New Yorkers in their homes to help patients and their families understand and manage the ins and outs of heart disease and wellness. This almost always includes [managing high blood pressure](#), or hypertension, a leading cause of heart disease.

Taking time to educate those patients and families who are most at risk for chronic cardiac conditions is one of the most important things we can do for our patients. American Heart Month is a great time to share this knowledge with a larger audience, so here are seven heart-healthy habits we encourage you to incorporate into your own daily to-do's. A

commitment to heart health may mean shifts large or small in daily life, but your heart – and your loved ones – will thank you.

## Steps to improving your

1. Get educated.
2. Manage your diet.
3. Get moving.
4. Manage your stress.
5. Cut back on drinking and smoking.
6. Be mindful of your mind.
7. Stay connected to care.

### **Step 1: Get Educated**

The most powerful weapon against heart disease is knowledge. Take every opportunity to learn about your risk for high blood pressure or a heart attack. There are high-risk populations who will want to take extra precautions when it comes to being heart healthy. This includes African Americans and people with diabetes and other chronic illnesses such as [arthritis](#), [COPD](#), stress and heart disease. Men and women have different risks, with men being at a higher risk of heart attack and women, especially after menopause, having a number of cardiovascular vulnerabilities.

### **Step 2: Manage Your Diet**

Watching what you eat – specifically, avoiding foods high in unhealthy fats, sugar and salt – can help [prevent weight gain](#) and keep cholesterol levels under control. Be sure to read food labels to check the amount of sodium in packaged foods (in fact, avoid packaged foods when you can). Keeping a food journal is a simple way to hold yourself accountable to your healthy eating goals. Writing down the content on your food labels – such as salt or sugar content levels – or how many servings of fruits and vegetables you have each day will help you see, manage and plan your diet more effectively.

### **Step 3: Get Moving!**

Just 15 to 30 minutes of light physical activity three to five days a week can help [reduce your risk for stroke](#) and heart disease. Small steps can lead to big progress if you just add a little activity to your life: walk to the mailbox or the corner market every day; get off one stop early and walk a few extra blocks if you ride the bus or subway. If you can't get outdoors, even a stroll down the hallway at home can be of benefit. It's a start!

### **Step 4: Manage Your Stress**

Yes, sometimes stress is unavoidable, but most of the time we can take a few minutes to separate from the typical tensions that we all face in a busy day. This is especially important when recovering from any heart-related health issue. To help reduce your risk for hypertension, give yourself regular 10-minute de-stressing breaks to listen to music, visit with a friend, meditate, practice gentle yoga or take care of a pet.

### **Step 5: Quit (or at least cut back on) Smoking and Drinking**

Smoking raises blood pressure and can cause strokes – so do everything you can to try to cut back or, better yet, [stop smoking](#), including enrolling in a smoking cessation program. Limiting your alcohol consumption is also important, as alcohol can adversely affect some heart medications and heavy use increases stroke risk. Each person is different, but moderation is crucial.

### **Step 6: Be Mindful of the Mind**

Patients with heart disease and stroke survivors are at high risk for experiencing depression. Adapting to a new lifestyle and impaired mobility, speech or cognitive function can present significant challenges. Frustration and [depression](#) are especially common in the winter months. Talk with your health care provider about the signs and [symptoms of depression](#) as well as online or community resources that may be available easily accessible for you.

### **Step 7: Stay Connected to Care**

It's especially important for those at high risk for hypertension to stay in communication with their physicians and to be mindful of their blood pressure and related health risks. As always, it's important to consult your health provider before making significant changes in your diet or fitness routine.

Someone recently sent me a meme that reads: "Dear heart, Please stop getting involved in everything. Your job is to pump blood, and that's it." That made me smile. Figuratively and literally, our heart gives us life. I hope that this American Heart Month, you'll do your best to help it pump blood a little easier.

***Jennifer Brullo, RN, MBA, is Senior Vice President and the leader of Partners in Care, an affiliate of The Visiting Nurse Service of New York that provides quality private care services. VNSNY is the largest not-for-profit home- and community-based health care agency in the United States. For more information please visit [www.partnersincareny.org](http://www.partnersincareny.org) or call 1-888-735-8913.***