

The York University Staff Association Health & Wellness News & Views

It may be difficult to focus beyond a global pandemic and the anxiety of waiting to receive a COVID vaccine, but serious health concerns such as cardiovascular disease, don't take a break, not even for COVID 19. So, here's to a healthy heart.

This month not only holds the holiday built to celebrate love, Valentine's Day, but also marks Heart Health Month in Canada! Promoted by Health Canada, Heart Health Month aims to raise awareness for heart-related illnesses and causes, while encouraging Canadians to take action to improve upon their own personal heart health. Your heart beats strong and steady at an average rate of 60 to 100 beats a minute, pumping life-giving blood through your veins. You literally can't live without it. Yet heart disease is the #1 cause of death in North America. Every seven minutes, a person dies from stroke or heart disease in Canada. Did your heart just skip a beat right there? Those are frightening statistics. It's no coincidence that both Valentine's Day and Family Day are in the same month as Heart & Stroke Month. Just as we show love to our Valentines and our families, let's show a little love to our beating hearts!

Nothing says "I love you" like taking steps to ensure that you can keep on loving and being loved for a very long, long time. And staying young at heart means more than keeping things fun and passionate, it means keeping your heart functioning optimally so that there are lots and lots of years of Valentines, lots of quality time to share lives and share love. To promote heart health, evaluate your own risk factors. What do you eat? Do you have an exercise routine? Do you get enough sleep? Do you monitor your blood pressure or cholesterol levels? Do you smoke, drink heavily or have difficulty managing stress? Taking care of your ticker might seem like a daunting task, but there are many small steps we can take to do just that. Many risk factors for heart disease can be modified and are totally in your control. You are in the driver seat sitting shot gun without a passenger when it comes to your own heart health.

Your sweetheart may have the key to your heart, but a proper diet and regular physical activity can be the key to a healthy heart. Make heart healthy changes in your diet. Eat foods low in trans and saturated fat, added

sugar and sodium. Try to fill at least half your plate with vegetables and fruits, and heart healthy grains. Studies show that people who aren't very active are more likely to have heart disease than those who are. Aim to get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity a week to lower your risk of developing coronary heart disease. You can split up the 150 minutes any way you like. For instance, have a brisk 30-minute walk every lunchtime during the week. Walking is easy and every step counts!



Yes, eat the Valentine chocolate! Dark chocolate not only tastes delicious, but it also contains heart-healthy flavonoids. These compounds help reduce inflammation and lower your risk of heart disease, suggest scientists in the journal "Nutrients". Eaten in moderation, dark chocolate not over sweetened milk chocolate can actually be good for you. The next time you want to indulge your sweet tooth, sink it into a square or two of dark chocolate. No guilt required.

Well, some beg to differ, sleep is not a luxury. It is critical to good health. If you're one of the many people who toss and turn nightly, you already know that a bout of sleeplessness can hamper your productivity and sap your quality of life. But the ramifications of poor sleep extend far beyond a cranky mood. Research shows that an on-going sleep deficit can ultimately endanger your heart health. Poor sleep is linked to high blood pressure and heart disease. Over time, poor sleep can also lead to unhealthy habits that can hurt your heart, including higher stress levels, less motivation to be physically active, and unhealthy food choices. Avoid negative

influences on sleep: Alcohol and caffeine can both interfere with sleep and are best avoided at night. Excessive use of electronic devices, including your cell phone, can also throw off your sleep patterns, which is why experts recommend not using these devices for an hour or more before bed. Plan a consistent sleep schedule: Keeping the same bedtime and wakeup time every day is widely considered to be one of the keyways to encourage healthy and stable sleep from night to night. Good sleep hygiene can serve as a foundation for better sleep, creating habits that make it easier to get both the quantity and quality of sleep that you need for a strong and healthy heart.



Every cigarette contains more than 4,000 harmful chemicals including nicotine which triggers the body to release adrenaline. This narrows the blood vessels and forces the heart to beat harder. Therefore, smoking damages the blood vessels, and reduces the amount of oxygen in the blood. Smoking can lead to heart disease, stroke, cancer, lung diseases and stomach ulcers. Quitting smoking benefits your heart and cardiovascular system now and in the future. Twenty minutes after you quit smoking, your heart rate drops. Just 12 hours after quitting smoking, the carbon monoxide level in the blood drops to normal, allowing more oxygen to vital organs like your heart. Within four years of quitting, your risk of stroke drops to that of lifetime nonsmokers. Bottom line, if you smoke try your best to quit. Your heart and your loved ones will thank you.

Even minor stress can trigger heart problems. Your body's response to stress is supposed to protect you. But, if it's constant, it can harm you. The hormone cortisol is released in response to stress. Studies suggest that the high levels of cortisol from long-term stress can increase blood cholesterol, triglycerides, blood sugar, and in turn blood pressure. These are common risk factors for heart disease. This stress can also cause changes that promote the buildup of plaque deposits in the arteries. This buildup impedes blood flow and can even lead to complete blockages. As a result, the risk of major

cardiovascular events such as heart attack and stroke are far higher than normal. Some people are simply more prone to stress than others, whether due to their genetic makeup or past experiences. For these individuals, it is especially important to learn healthy coping mechanisms that can effectively reduce stress. The most commonly effective stress reduction techniques include: Regular exercise. Regular exposure to sunlight. Good sleep habits. Yoga, stretching, relaxation, deep breathing techniques such as meditation, and my personal favourite, Laugh therapy. Laughter is a fun, free and easy. When you laugh, you take in more oxygen. Your heart, lungs, and muscles get a boost and your body releases those feel-good hormones. Laughter also improves your immune system, lessens pain, and improves your mood for long periods time. So, enjoy laughter when it comes and use it as another thread in the web of connections that help keep us heart healthy.

This February, the month when we celebrate love, is a great time to commit to a healthy lifestyle and make small changes that can lead to a lifetime of heart health. Just one of these actions could be the best Valentine's Day gift you've ever given. Your heart is the only thing keeping your body alive. Learn how to love your heart and make sure the beat goes on. May your February be filled with lots of LOVE!

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