

21-DAYS TO HEALTHY HEART HABITS

Disclaimer: Use caution when beginning a new nutrition program. Not all exercise programs are suitable for everyone. Check with your doctor before you begin. We will not be responsible or liable for any injury sustained as a result of using any program presented and/or discussed on the website, via email communications or in video format.

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Introduction

We tend to take our heart for granted--until something goes wrong with it. Our heart is the most important muscle in the body, beating more than 100,000 times a day to send oxygen-rich blood to all the tissues and cells in the body in order to keep them healthy.

As we age, however, there are a number of things that can compromise our cardiovascular health that is the health of our heart and blood vessels. Some of these issues may be hereditary, but the good news is that most of them are actually lifestyle-related. By modifying your lifestyle, you can offset any genetic issues and do your best to boost your heart health.

In this guide, we will be presenting you with a 21-day challenge to help you improve your heart health in all-natural ways. Many of the suggested activities are actually be easy to implement. Others will be a case of you starting out and then needing to follow through.

While you will find 21 suggestions, it is important to set your own goals. Determine what is most important for you to tackle in relation to your heart health based on your age, family history, overall condition at the moment, and your most important numbers from your doctor.

Let's look first at why heart health is so important, and then at the numbers you need to know in order to set goal/s for your heart health challenge.

Why Heart Health Is So Important

Heart health should be important for obvious reasons, but many people focus so much on cancer prevention, that they forget heart disease is the #1 killer worldwide of both men and women.

In the United States, heart health is considered to be a 'man's problem'. While it is true that more than 390,000 men have heart attacks each year, it is also true that more than 271,000 women experience them. Studies have also shown that women have less favorable outcomes than men because they do not always suffer the same dramatic symptoms as a man having a heart attack.

A heart attack is triggered by a severe or complete cutting off of the blood supply to the heart via one of the main coronary arteries. Those with coronary heart disease will often experience a narrowing (stenosis) of the arteries due to cholesterol, which forms what is called plaque. The plaque buildup on the blood vessel walls leads to hardening of the arteries.

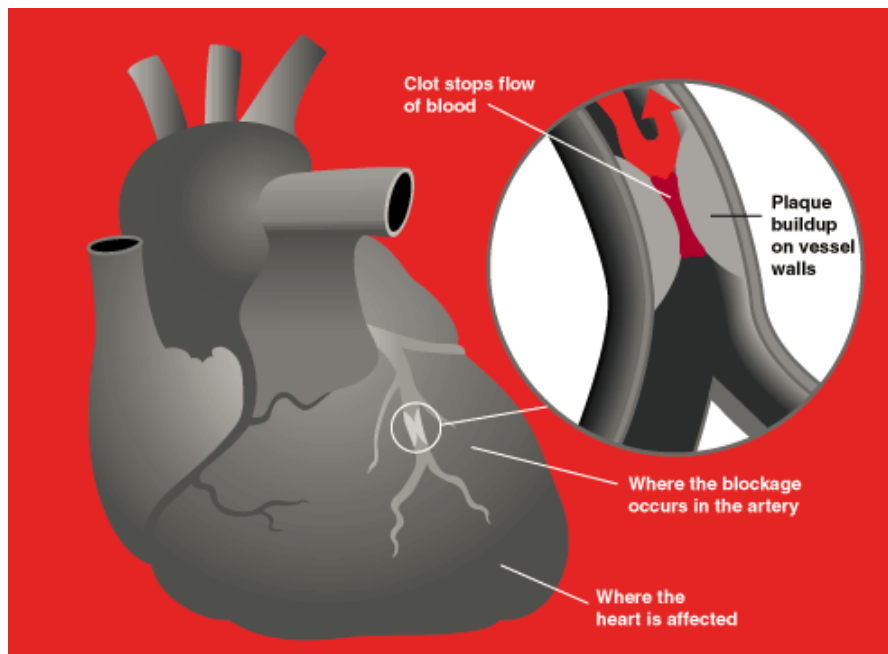


Figure 1: A heart attack

[Image Source](#) The plaque will either cause the vessel to become so narrow that the tissue of the heart starts to become starved of oxygen, or a part of the plaque will break off to form a clot, which can then get jammed in a narrowed artery and

cut off the blood flow completely. If this happens, any heart tissue served by that blocked artery will die, and if enough damage is done, it can lead to severe consequences.

Since time is of the essence when it comes to stopping a heart attack in its track, an untreated heart attack will continue to cause damage to the heart, resulting in tissue death and perhaps even actual death. Statistics show that up to 50% of women who have a heart attack die within the first year. Studies have also shown that by the time she is in her 80s, a woman's risk of a heart attack becomes equal and then greater than that of a man.

Heart disease kills more men and women each year than the top 10 causes of cancer combined. Even the most lethal of cancers, lung cancer, only kills around 66,000 people per year. We should not minimize these deaths in any way, but we should make heart health our first priority. Fortunately, a lot of what is healthy for the heart will be healthy for the whole body as well, and can therefore lead to effective cancer prevention too.

So let's get started with your road to better heart health and overall health. It's time to start your first week of your 21-day challenge.

Week 1 - Getting Started

In your first week, you will be laying the foundation for your heart-healthy lifestyle. The most important part of this process will be starting realistically from where you are in your life in terms of health, diet and level of activity, and then gradually adding heart-healthy tactics each day, or beginning heart-healthy steps that will give you excellent results if you keep up the good work. Let's get started with your first big day.



Day 1 - Know Your Numbers

We will start your first day of your challenge by looking at the most important numbers you need to know in relation to your current state of health. In this way you can make informed decisions about your heart healthy goals as you work your way through the 21 day challenge.

If you have been to the doctor within the last 3 months, your first step is to call them to ask about your readings for the following:

1. blood pressure
2. weight and heights
3. Blood glucose reading
4. total cholesterol
5. LDL cholesterol
6. HDL cholesterol
7. Triglycerides

If you have not been to the doctor recently, make an appointment. When you get the results back from your tests, treat that as the first day of your challenge.

1-Blood pressure is an important number because it measures how much force is inside the arteries when the heart pumps. Too much force can lead to hardening of the arteries.

2-Your weight and height are used to calculate your Body Mass Index, or BMI, which is an indicator of whether or not you're a normal weight, overweight, or obese.

3-Your blood glucose level will determine whether or not you are healthy, pre-diabetic or diabetic. Those with diabetes frequently have heart-health issues and a number of other serious potential problems if they do not keep their blood sugar under control, such as damage to eyes, kidneys and nerves.

Items 4 through 7 are all related to your cholesterol levels. Cholesterol is a waxy fat in our bodies produced by the liver. It is also consumed as part of our diet if we eat food derived from animal sources, such as meat, dairy and eggs.

LDL cholesterol, or bad cholesterol (think L for Lousy) can contribute to hardening of the arteries. HDL, or helpful cholesterol, can keep arteries free of clogging LDL cholesterol molecules. High triglycerides come from animal foods and high carbohydrate diets and can contribute to weight gain if you are not exercising regularly in order to burn the calories you are consuming instead of storing them.

Once you know all 7 of these numbers, note them down in a new heart health diary. This will help you track your progress during the challenge and as you keep up the good habits you will begin over the next few weeks.

LDL Cholesterol	
<100	Optimal
100-129	Near optimal/above optimal
130-159	Borderline high
160-189	High
≥190	Very high
Total Cholesterol	
<200	Desirable
200-239	Borderline high
≥240	High
HDL Cholesterol	
<40	Low
≥60	High

Figure 2: Start your heart health diary

You might have an issue with one of the 7 numbers, 2 or 3, or even all 7. Here are the normal ranges for all of them, with the exception of BMI, which we will discuss in a moment.

1-Blood Pressure-normal is 120/80, read as 120 over 80.

3-Blood Glucose-normal is between 4% and 6%

4-Total-Less than 200

5-LDL-Less than 100

6-HDL-60 or more

7-Triglycerides-Less than 150

For the BMI, first calculate it and see where your number falls in terms of the ranges set. If you are in normal range, great. If you are not, look at the Tables to see what is a normal BMI reading for someone of your height, and what weight would be a good target to aim for.

Consider aiming for the middle of the range so you don't need to worry about a couple of pounds creeping on meaning you end up in the overweight bracket. If you have to lose weight, write down that target number for future reference.

Now that you are more organized, you will be ready to set personal goals.



Figure 3: Start from where you are

Day 2 – Start Today, Not Your Past

We tend to suffer from nostalgia in relation to the ‘good old days’ when we were younger and fitter. Unfortunately, those days are long gone for many of us, especially if we have not made regular physical activity an important part of our daily lives. Our health might also be compromised by underlying medical conditions such as arthritis, which can make it painful to try to work out.

In your journal, you have noted down your most important numbers. Use them to start from where you are, that is, your baseline measurements.

Now make some note about the following:

- Age
- Gender
- Level of activity
- Favorite activities
- Underlying health issues
- Eating habits-try to keep a food diary today and for the rest of the week about everything you eat.
- What your stress level is
- How well you are sleeping
- If you’ve been feeling sad or anxious recently

We are more at risk of certain illnesses depending on age and gender. For example, 90% of people who have rheumatoid arthritis are women between the ages of 35 and 55.

In terms of level of activity, are you at the computer or sitting down most of the day? Do you work out at all? If so, what do you like to do? Aim for activities you enjoy so working out as you add activity to your day each day will not seem like such a chore.

Whenever you are starting a new self-care routine such as a diet or new exercise regimen, always take your current medical conditions into account. Even if you already have heart disease, for example, there are many things you can do to improve your heart health. It will just be a case of discussing with your doctor what is safe and sensible for you.

Keeping a food diary can help you spot patterns and unhealthy eating habits. It will also show you where a lot of your calories are being consumed, such as in snacks throughout the day compared to a good dinner each night.

If you have time, use a good food database to count the calories you are consuming. The suggested daily calorie allowance is 2,500 for men and 2,000 for women, but this supposes a certain level of activity each day. It is also a blanket recommendation which might be relevant to people in their 20s and 30s, but will cause weight gain in people over 40 when their metabolisms slow down.

It takes 3,500 calories burned to lose a pound, but only 2,000 extra calories consumed and not burned to gain a pound. This being the case, it will be important for your heart health to try to get down to a sensible weight. Losing even 20 pounds has been shown to help with arthritis and even reverse diabetes in some cases.

Your stress levels, ability to get 8 hours of sleep a night, and overall mood can also affect your healthy. Now that we understand better the mind, body and spirit connection when it comes to our health, it is important to take a holistic view, not just worry about food and diet.

During this exercise, it is important to be honest. In this way you can focus on what you really need to pay attention to in order to improve your heart health. Once you write down your answers in your diary, you're ready for tomorrow's activity, using what you've learned to set SMART goals.



Figure 4: 3-Set SMART goals

Day 3 – Set SMART Goals

Now that you have established your baseline in terms of your numbers and where you are at the moment in terms of your health and life, you can decide on a health goal you wish to achieve. Depending on your numbers, your priority might be to lower your cholesterol naturally, lose weight, or increase your physical activity. More than likely, you will wish to do all three, but choose one as your first heart-healthy goal and make it a SMART one.

SMART stands for:

- Specific
- Measureable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Timed

Most people who try to set a goal are too vague and therefore don't succeed. We hear everyone say, "I want to lose weight," but how much? When?

A SMART example would be: I want to lose 20 pounds by the time I go to my class reunion in June, 12 weeks away.

This goal is Specific=20 pounds

Timed=12 weeks, by the time of their class reunion

Relevant-it is important to them-they have a reason for wanting to lose the weight

Measureable=they start at 160 and need to go down to 140. Every time they weight themselves, they can measure their progress.

Achievable=It is possible to lose 20 pounds safely within 12 weeks at the rate of 1 to 2 pounds per week.

If you are already thin and having cholesterol issues, losing weight would not be Relevant. For you, a goal might be to cut back on red meat and eat an additional fruit or vegetable with every meal for the next 21 days and then check your cholesterol numbers again.

A lot of people say they want to 'eat better'. Better means different things to different people. To make it measureable, you could aim for the general recommendation of 11 servings per day. Create a fruit and veggie checklist of 11 items per day and cross them off each time you eat one. Track yourself for a day or 2 to see what your base level is, then add one. And no, potato chips and fries don't count as a veggie. A baked potato or microwaved sweet potato will.

The fruits can be consumed in smoothies, as snacks, such as apple slices or celery sticks with peanut butter and raisins, or even as a dessert, such as berries, baked apples and so on.

If your cholesterol is very high, a [home monitor](#) with test strips can help you measure your progress to lower your total, LDL, and triglycerides as you work your way towards your SMART goal. This can be an expensive investment, but check to see if it is covered by insurance or your flexible spending account. It could also be deducted from your taxes if you are spending 10% or more on health care costs in a calendar year if you are based in the US.

Discuss your SMART goal with your doctor to make sure you are on the right track, For example, if your doctor tells you the most important thing to worry about is losing weight, then look at the BMI tables, determine what a normal weight would be for somebody of your height , and start tracking your progress towards that goal. This will of course take more than 21 days to achieve if you need to lose more than 20 pounds, but you have to get started somewhere in terms of heart-healthy activities.

If your cholesterol is an issue, then the dietary changes that we will suggest as part of this 21 day heart health challenge will help you lower your cholesterol to meet the targets your doctor suggests. Cholesterol is naturally produced by the body; it is not just in the animal-based foods you eat. For some people, the changes they make in the next 3 weeks may not be enough to lower cholesterol right away, but taken over time, they are all a step in the right direction. If you still can't meet your goals, then it will be time to discuss other options with your doctor.

As with all aspects of health, it is best to try to achieve your goals through natural means rather than try to take a pill hoping that that will be a cure all. For example, many people take statin drugs such as atorvastatin (Lipitor) to lower their LDL cholesterol. However, statin drugs are known to have a range of potentially dangerous side effects, including muscle pain, liver damage, kidney damage, neurological issues, and even heart damage.



Figure 5: 4-Start a walking program

Day 4 – Start A Walking Program

The 21 days activities that we will be outlining for you are all designed to help you live as naturally as possible to improve your heart health. There's no need for

pills, potions, fads or crazy gimmicks in order to improve your cardiovascular well-being.

Tomorrow we will get started with another tried and tested method of improving your health.

A walking program is one of the easiest ways to increase activity, burn more calories, and improve your health. Get a good pair of walking shoes and some sunscreen and start with a 15 minute walk each day rain or shine. If the weather is terrible, walk around a mall instead. Just leave the credit cards at home to keep your bank account healthy too.

Gradually walk a little further every day. Also consider getting off a stop before or a stop after your usual one on your commute to and from work in order to work more physical activity into your busy day. Consider investing in a pedometer to track your progress in your journal.



Figure 6: 5-Deal with high blood pressure

Day 5 – Take Charge of Your Blood Pressure

If your blood pressure has turned out to be high, you might wish to invest in a home monitor. You can also try the heart-healthy [DASH diet](#), Dietary Approaches for Stopping Hypertension (the clinical name for high blood pressure [HBP]). The DASH diet was invented by researchers who wanted to see if it was possible to control HBP through eating habits alone, without the need for medicines with side effects. The answer is a definite yes. Download and print out the free guides

available and start planning heart healthier menus. The easiest way to lower HBP is through reducing sodium in your diet. Let's look at this topic in more detail tomorrow.

Now that you are aware of the impact of sodium on blood pressure, it's time to start making some heart healthy eating choices in relation to the convenience foods you've been eating, and making the switch to fresh foods.

Check all the food in the house and read the labels to see how high it is in sodium and fat. Set a threshold based on daily allowances as part of a balanced diet. If you see a can of soup has 50% of your daily allowance of sodium in 1 serving, put it in a box or bag to donate to your local food bank.

Then shop for smarter choices, or best of all, discover easy, healthy recipes such as those in the [DASH diet](#). They should help lower blood pressure and cholesterol and will usually help you lose weight too.



Figure 7: Day 6-Clean out the cabinets

Day 6 – Remove Temptations

If you don't keep tempting foods in the house, you won't be able to eat them. Stick to a shopping list and never shop for groceries when you are hungry or tired, since this can lead to out of control shopping, spending and eating.

Ever see anyone eating in the aisles at your local store? We're sure you have. And we're willing to bet it was a bag of potato chips or cookies, not a bag of carrot sticks or an apple.

You may hate the idea of throwing money away, but get a receipt for your donations and you can write them off on your taxes. Once your cupboards are bare, it will be time to shop strategically for healthier foods.

Also clean out your fridge. Steer clear of smoked foods and cheese, which are very high in sodium because salt is used as a cheap preservative. Aim for fresh salmon, for example, and low salt cheese instead of regular or smoked.

Chances are if you cut back on your sodium, you should lose 5 to 10 pounds of water weight in no time. And of course every little bit of weight loss helps when it comes to heart health and taking care of your back, hips and knees.

Tomorrow we will turn our attention to other easy ways to make the switch to a heart-healthy lifestyle.



Day 7 - Make Simple Changes Whenever Possible

You don't have to give up everything you love. Instead of whole milk, try 2%, 1% or fat-free. Or try soy milk, which is rich and creamy, and has more calcium in it than regular milk.

Discover easy but healthy 'copycat' recipes from your favorite restaurants, with all of the flavor but far fewer calories and harmful ingredients. Research recipe substitutions that are healthy, such as unsweetened applesauce in your baking instead of butter.

You don't have to give up potato chips forever. Slice your spuds thinly and oil a baking sheet with olive oil. Bake them about 10 minutes, then turn them over and

bake them until crisp. Try this with sweet potatoes too, for a fancier chip at a fraction of the price you would pay for a bag in the supermarket.

Make your own granola with whole oats and real maple syrup. Avoid commercial brands and trail mix types of snack bars, which may seem healthy but actually have more salt, sugar and fat in them than a fast food burger.

Also avoid drinking too many calories in the form of coffee-based drinks from the chain on the corner. If you really can't resist the taste of the coffee, order a small one in a large cup, and add skim milk and spices such as the cinnamon, nutmeg and cocoa they put out on the side. You can have a tasty customized cup of coffee for a fraction of the price and non-nutritious calories.

Avoid instant pudding, which is full of salt, and make your own bread pudding using up any aging bread you don't want to waste, 3 or 4 eggs or egg whites, plus skim milk and cinnamon. Add apples or raisins to make it even healthier.

There are many super-easy recipes you can cook from scratch once you do the research to find slimmer versions of your favorite dishes. Save your favorites in a folder on your desktop and/or print them out to save them in a folder to keep near your heart healthy journal. Note the calories per serving, suggested number of servings, fat, carbs and proteins. Aim for foods high in protein and low in carbs and fat.

Use these recipes to start to plan meals for your calorie allowance each day. If you want to start losing weight, shave 500 calories off your daily allowance and divide up the remaining calories into 3 meals a day plus a couple of snacks. For example, if you are a woman going down to 1,500 calories per day, aim for 200 to 300 calories at breakfast, the same or up to 400 calories at lunch, 500 for dinner, and the rest (300) as three 100-calorie snacks throughout the day.

Don't buy those snack packs-make your own using small zip top baggies and a kitchen scale to measure out nuts, raisins and so on.

Congratulations on making it through week 1. You've laid the foundation for a heart healthy lifestyle this week through learning your numbers and setting goals to improve them. You've also learned why sodium is so bad for you and how to

make the most of the calories you do consume. Tomorrow will be time to start your second week, with another heart-healthy tip for Day 8.

Week 2 - Continuing The Progress

Now that you've made it through week 1, you have a much better idea of the main components of a heart-healthy lifestyle, such as what to eat and what not to eat, and how to increase your physical activity each day. Let's continue to keep up the good work and progress even further in week 2.



Day 8 - Choose A Healthy Eating Lifestyle

You have a wide range of choices when it comes to adopting a heart-healthy lifestyle. It is up to you how far you want to go in terms of eating lifestyle.

Some people decide to go vegetarian or even vegan, that is, no products from any living creature, including honey from bees, to get their cholesterol down. Others cut back on animal protein several times a week with meatless Mondays, and adding more lean poultry and fish to their diet. It is up to you. Just remember, it is an eating lifestyle, not a life sentence with no chance of parole.

If you are going to become vegetarian or vegan, invest in some good cookbooks and a book on nutrition and take time to plan out some balanced meals for a

week. Also check to see if your insurance covers visit/s to a nutritionist. If it does, explain your desire to cut cholesterol naturally and come up with a food plan you can live with. Even if you only get a couple of appointments covered by your plan, this can be more than enough to get you started on a healthy eating plan, and one which will help you lose weight if that is one of your health goals.

It can be a real commitment to change your eating habits and start cooking for yourself more, but cooking from scratch can be a fun and interesting hobby, especially if you share what you learn with friends and loved ones.

If you have a number of risk factors for heart disease, going meat-free or becoming vegetarian could be one of the smartest and greenest decisions you ever make.



Day 9 - Choose The Best Fats

Opt for the avocado and other healthy fats.

Speaking of green, avocados are one of the healthiest things you can eat, in moderation of course. Avocados are a fruit that tastes great and they also contain heart-healthy fats. Eat them on their own right from the skin, or slice and put on a sandwich with turkey. Mash them into homemade guacamole, or use as a healthy substitute for mayo with turkey or chicken sandwiches. Also add them to your salad dressing to make Green Goddess.

Other healthy fats include extra virgin olive oil (EVOO), canola oil, and peanut oil. Steer clear of what are labeled lite or light oils, such as olive oil. These are usually just diluted with cheaper oils that are less heart healthy. If you can't use EVOO in

all your cooking and baking because of the taste, dilute it yourself with canola oil until it will work well for whatever use you wish to put it to.

Also steer clear of vegetable oil, since you don't know which oils are in them. Sunflower and safflower may sound healthy and natural, but they aren't. Finally, skip the coconut oil fad, which has no scientific basis. It is great for moisturizing hair and skin but is high in saturated fat.

Steer clear of butter due to the cholesterol, and be careful of margarines as well. They will often contain trans fats in order to make the oil solid and spreadable. Do as the Italians do and dip your bread in EVVO or olive oil to moisten it and add flavor.

Of course, it is important to use oils sparingly, since they are the most calorie dense compared to fruits and vegetables and proteins, but without as many nutrients.

Speaking of fruits and veggies, get ready to have fun tomorrow.



Day 10 - Eat a rainbow every day

When adding fruits and vegetables to your diet, aim to eat a rainbow, that is, a variety of foods in different colors. They all have different phytochemicals that are

good for your health. Make sure you eat more veggies than fruit, which can be high in fructose, that is, fruit sugar.

Feel bloated after eating fruit? You may be fructose-sensitive. Try fruits that are not normally fermented into alcohol, such as grapes and apples, and this should eliminate gastric upset.



Day 11 - Aim for Antioxidants

Antioxidants help combat wear and tear on the body due to aging and environmental factors, a process called oxidation. Berries and green tea are all rich in antioxidants.

Fresh or frozen berries can seem like a luxury due to the cost, but can be enjoyed in small quantities at almost any meal, from breakfast to dessert.

You can get frozen berries on sale in the supermarket at various times of the year or cut coupons so you don't have to pay full price. When fruit are in season, freeze them yourself by blanching them in hot water, or pulverize them into your own puree to use as sorbet or granita (similar to sorbet).

When drinking green tea, choose the decaf version.

Day 12 - Move More

You should have already gotten into a good walking habit by now as you have progressed with this 21-day challenge, so it is time to look at more specific heart-healthy guidelines.

The recommendation is 250 minutes of moderate activity per week for adults, and 2 sessions of strength training. This means around 45 minutes of activity 6

days a week, and strength training every 3 days, which will give you one day off a week if you like. (Keep walking every day if you can.)

Moderate activity such as a brisk walk or other aerobic activity should increase your heart rate and make you feel a bit breathless, but not gasping for air. Try walking at a nice nature spot if you can or a pretty park. Bring your dog, spouse, kids, or fitness buddy to enjoy the walk even more.

If you have diabetes, be extra careful to avoid blisters. If you have circulation issues in your legs or feet, cycling/spinning might be better options.



In terms of strength training, it will help increase lean muscle and lower your body fat ratio. Choices include calisthenics, yoga, tai chi, light weights and [resistance bands](#). Gauge your activity to your current level of fitness. Start slowly and observe proper form and posture to avoid injury. Try not to slouch, and care for your back.



Day 13 - Eat More Filling Foods

You know how stuffed you feel if you go to a restaurant and have the soup and salad to start with, followed by your main course and dessert? Why not do the same at home?

Make your own soup (non-cream based), create a delicious salad with your own homemade dressing, and chances are you will eat a lot less by the time you are supposed to eat the main course. You might even cut your cravings for dessert by eating filling foods. Eat slowly-it takes your brain about 20 minutes to register that you are full, so wolfing down your food puts you at real danger of overeating.

If you do have a sweet tooth, try a 0% fat Greek style vanilla yogurt such as Chobani with a little slice of homemade cake and some berries. The yogurt is as rich as whipped cream or pudding, for a fraction of the calories or sodium in the case of the pudding.

Fiber can always help you feel fuller. So can protein, and small quantities of healthy fats. Serve plenty of side dishes for color and variety. Even if you are dieting, this will help you feel a lot less deprived.



Day 14 - If You Drink Alcohol, Try Red Wine

If you don't drink, don't start. If you do drink, cut back on other forms of alcohol and limit yourself to 1 glass of red wine to your dinner at night.

If you don't drink, you can also switch to red wine vinegar for your salad dressing, and/or eating purple grapes in order to get high levels of heart-healthy resveratrol.

Congratulations on making it through week 2. By now you should be noticing a difference in how you feel based on all of the heart healthy activities you have done and the foods you have added to your eating lifestyle. Let's look next at making even more beneficial changes in week 3.

Week 3 - Making Even More Heart-Healthy Changes

Now that you've completed the first 2 weeks of the challenge, you are probably feeling motivated to keep going because you can feel a real difference in body, mind and spirit. The activities this week will aid you in these areas even more.



Day 15 - Get Fond Of Fish

Eat fatty fish, such as salmon, tuna, mackerel, and sardines a couple of times a week. You'll get omega-3 fatty acids that raise HDL cholesterol and very lean protein too, which can help you feel full. Eating less meat will mean cutting LDL at the same time.

Avoid fish oil supplements, as they are seldom pure. Also avoid eating tuna from a can more than twice a week, 3 days apart, due to high mercury levels.

Day 16 - Go Nuts For Nuts



If you practice portion control, that is, measure out a portion of peanuts according to the serving size on the label and stick to it, nuts can add fiber and healthy fats to your diet. One ounce of peanuts has around 170 calories, but they can help you feel fuller for longer. One study showed that those who ate 1 ounce of raw peanuts (no oil, no salt) 30 minutes before dinner, ate significantly less.

For heart-healthy nuts every day, aim for walnuts and almonds. Use a [good kitchen scale](#) to measure out portions and put the portions in a baggie or zippered food storage bag. NEVER eat directly out of the can, box or bag. It is all too easy to fall prey to mindless eating if you do.

Day 17 - Just Say "No" To Stress

Stress puts a great deal of wear and tear on our bodies, particularly our hearts. Anything you can do to manage stress and reduce it will mean less inflammation in the body, and therefore less risk of cardiovascular disease.

Effective ways to relieve stress include:

- Exercise
- Yoga
- Meditation
- Taking breaks at work
- Going for a walk at lunch
- Not trying to multitask
- Soaking in a warm bath
- Listening to music
- Engaging in an activity or hobby you love

and more.

If you've been working so hard you've been neglecting your health, it's time to switch priorities and put your heart health first.

Day 18 - Deal With Any Sleep Disorders

All adults should try to get 8 hours of high-quality sleep per night, up to a maximum of 9 hours. Any more than that is also considered to be unhealthy.

As people age, they tend to sleep less, but still need 8 hours to refresh and renew body and mind. Their patterns might change, however. If you do take a nap during the day, limit it to no more than 30 minutes so you don't oversleep and then have trouble falling asleep at night.

Sleep deprivation has been shown to be as dangerous as drinking and driving. Lack of sleep and the inability to stay asleep can turn into insomnia, which is very unhealthy for body and mind.

There are a range of strategies referred to as sleep hygiene that can help signal that it is time for you to go to sleep. A set bedtime every night and an alarm in the morning can help keep you on track.

Don't ruin your quality of sleep by dozing off in front of the TV. Go to your bedroom, which should not have a TV or DVD or work items in it. Put on comfortable night clothes, and do your pre-bed routine. This might include showering, brushing your teeth, washing your face, and so on.

A comfortable bed with nice sheets and a cool but not cold room, with a warm light weight cover, should help you snuggle down and start snoozing in next to no time. Improving the quality of your sleep will reduce stress and increase mental focus. This will help you power through your day instead of struggle to try to get everything done when all you want to do is sleep.

In your journal, note down a bedtime you think you can stick to, and count forward 8 hours to make sure you can get up and not be late for work and so on, which will only stress you more. Adjust your bedtime as needed. If you have no pre-bed routines, jot down a couple of ideas and then follow through tonight.

Stress can often trigger sleep problems, such as causing you to toss and turn and worry about things instead of falling asleep. Mood disorders can also cause significant sleep issues. We will look at this issue in more detail tomorrow.



Day 19 - Deal With Any Mood Disorders

Depression is now the #2 cause of disability in the world. But wait, we hear you say, how can it be considered a disability? Because depression can affect a person so negatively that they are literally unable to do essential activities important for maintaining a decent standard of living and good self-care.

Many people experience depression at some point in their lives, but especially as they age. Depression has also been linked to certain health conditions, such as fibromyalgia, arthritis and heart health problems. Around 20% of people with fibromyalgia have been found to also have depression. Amongst those with arthritis and heart issues, the number can be as high as 50%. For seniors, the figure can be as high as 75%.

Poorer health, social isolation, and poor self-care, such as not exercising or eating proper meals, can all contribute. A lack of exercise can also make mood disorders worse; exercise not only gives you more energy, it releases feel-good endorphins. A good night's sleep is often elusive for people with depression, and this can lead to stress.

If you have been feeling low-energy, listless and lacking in interest for things you used to love, you might be suffering from depression. If it is winter and the days are shorter, you might be suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD. Getting at least 15 minutes a day of sunshine can help (be sure to wear sunscreen of 30PF when going out.)

Make it a point to do something every day just for yourself, and one thing that you really enjoy. Pamper yourself with a hot bath or a trip to a new coffee shop--order the decaf. Play a video game online for a few minutes before tackling the next chore on your to-do list.

Above all, spend time with friends and family. Even if it is just a quick phone call or dinner together around the table, it can make a difference to your mood.

If you've tried all these things but still find yourself feeling sad or anxious, try meditation or guided imagery, in which you picture achieving all the things you want in life, or imagining a place you've always wished to visit. Both of these methods can help you break out of negative thought patterns.

You can even print out a picture of the location or carry one of your favorite photos with you to improve your mood. Keep the photo in your journal and look at it any time you need to enhance your mood or relieve stress.

Taking care of stress, sleep disorders and mood disorders can do wonders for your overall health and set you on the right track to better heart health too. So can tomorrow's suggested activity if it is relevant to your situation.



Day 20 - Stop Smoking

You can skip this day if you don't smoke, and focus on activities from the previous few days as needed.

If you do smoke, we know you are not going to accomplish this in one day, but it is enough to set the intention and start getting ready to quit through education and planning. Do your research on the best strategies for quitting, set a date on the calendar, and go for it.

Smoking does huge amounts of damage to your health. Plus, you work far too hard for your money to literally watch it go up in flames. And it is never too late to quit. Studies have shown that even heavy smokers can start to reverse the damage within a year. They can even become as healthy as someone who never smoked within 5 years of quitting.

Sure, it's tough to quit. But it's even harder to be chronically ill with heart disease and lung disorders. Still don't find that thought enough of an incentive? Set aside all the money you save on all the cigarettes you have been smoking to go on a dream vacation or achieve another of your most cherished ambitions. Chances are you will be shocked at how much money you will save once you cut down and then quit.

Day 21- Get Help And Support For Your Health Issues

Well done! Pat yourself on the back for making it this far. Keep up the great work. And remember, help is at hand if you need it.

Depending on your health goals, you may need more assistance and support than just trying to go it alone. For example, quitting smoking is never easy, but there are many free resources and support groups online that can help.

As you continue to research your main health concerns, you will find discussion boards, healthy eating suggestions, and more. Create a folder on your computer to save all of the useful material you find and a bookmark folder for the best sites that will support you in your health goals.

Now that you have discovered all 21 tips, in order to keep up the good work, take action in reference to the ones that are relevant to you and which strategies you find most helpful. Continue using your health journal to track your progress towards each of your health goals. Check in with your doctor about your progress. Reward yourself with something healthy when you do and see what a difference it can make to your health.

Conclusion

It may seem unlikely to improve your heart health and reduce your risk of heart attack and stroke in only 21 days, but the truth is that any healthy changes you make can all add up to a healthier new you.

If you have heart disease in your family, or have recently been diagnosed with an underlying heart issue, you owe it to yourself and your loved ones to take this challenge seriously and get yourself back on the road to better health. To your best health!

Resources

DASH diet guide

https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/files/docs/public/heart/new_dash.pdf

Food database

<http://ndb.nal.usda.gov/ndb/foods>

Recommended Daily Allowances

https://ods.od.nih.gov/Health_Information/Dietary_Reference_Intakes.aspx

Online Food Diary

<https://www.myfitnesspal.com/>

Fats: Good, Bad and Ugly Infographic

http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/NutritionCenter/HealthyEating/FATS-The-Good-the-Bad-and-the-Ugly-Infographic_UCM_468968_SubHomePage.jsp

Healthy Eating Quiz

<https://media.heart.org/fc/quiz/index-3.html?xmlHash=d5caa76b92efaeff980beb2e7b9e9199>

Heart Attack Image: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acute_coronary_syndrome