



February is American Heart Month. As we get older, changes take place in the heart and blood vessels that make us more susceptible to heart disease explains. Blood vessels may stiffen, heart valves may begin to fail, and sections of the heart wall may grow thicker. A common cause of high blood pressure is arteriosclerosis – the so-called hardening of the arteries.

Fortunately, by making certain lifestyle changes now you can significantly reduce the risk of heart disease. Here are some heart-healthy tips to consider:

- **Quit Smoking.** According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), the carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke raises blood pressure and heart rate. It does this by displacing some of the oxygen in your blood, which forces the heart to work harder to supply enough oxygen throughout the body. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) says your health and quality of life will start improving almost immediately upon quitting. Here is some compelling, eye-opening NIH numbers to consider:
 - 20 minutes after you stop smoking, your heart rate drops to more normal levels.
 - After 12 hours, the carbon monoxide level in your blood returns to normal.
 - 2 weeks to 3 months after quitting, your heart attack risk begins to drop and your lung function begins to improve.
- **Maintain a Healthy Weight.** Choose low-fat and low-salt foods. Eat plenty of vibrantly colored fruits and vegetables (they contain antioxidants and other highly beneficial nutrients), with a goal of five to 10 servings per day. Also, select foods high in fiber, such as oatmeal and whole-wheat bread, which are made from whole grains; and brown rice, which, unlike white rice, is a whole grain.
- **Do Moderate Physical Activity.** Check with your doctor for an exercise regimen that would be appropriate for you. If possible, aim to do at least 30 minutes of moderate-level activity on most or all days of the week, even if you break the exercise into 10-minute periods, with resting in between. The activities may include walking, swimming, or gardening, for example.
- **Reduce Alcohol Intake.** Excess alcohol consumption can worsen the conditions that contribute to heart disease, such as high blood pressure, arrhythmias and high cholesterol.
- **Decrease Stress.** Stress can compound many heart disease risks that some seniors already face. Find healthy outlets to relieve stress, such as yoga and meditation.

While family history and other factors may increase your risk of heart disease, a heart-healthy lifestyle may help you avoid or delay a serious heart-related illness. Consult your cardiologist for the preventative measures and, perhaps, medications that are right for you.

If you feel any chest pain, contact your doctor right away. Keep in mind that as we age, chest pain is a less common symptom of heart disease, so be aware of other signs, including pain in the shoulders, arms, neck, jaw or back; shortness of breath; lightheadedness; confusion; headaches; cold sweats; fatigue; or swelling in the ankles, feet, legs, stomach and/or neck