



# FEBRUARY IS AMERICAN HEART MONTH



February is a month filled with love, cupids and hearts full of chocolates. But it also is a time to take a good look at your heart health.

American Heart Month, celebrated each February, is a national initiative designed to help prevent heart attacks and strokes, said Janice Hermann, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension nutrition specialist.

“Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States. In fact, one in every three deaths is from heart disease and stroke,” Hermann said. “However, heart disease also is one of the most preventable diseases. American Heart Month is one way to help empower everyone to make heart-healthy choices.”

Heart disease is a broad term used for a variety of diseases of the heart, including coronary artery disease, arrhythmias and congenital heart defects. These diseases claim more lives than all forms of cancer combined, with coronary heart disease leading the pack.

“Someone has a heart attack about every 34 seconds in the United States and one person dies from a heart disease-related event every 60 seconds,” she said. “Those numbers are staggering. It’s important for everyone to know their family health history and be aware of the risk factors for heart disease.”

Although heart disease can occur at any age, four out of five people who die from coronary heart disease are 65 years of age or older. And keep in mind, the risk of stroke doubles with each decade after the age of 55.

While both men and women are equally at risk for heart disease, women tend to get coronary artery disease about 10 years later than men. A woman’s risk increases as she approaches menopause and continues to rise with age.

What can you do to help reduce the risk of heart disease? Start off by choosing to live a heart-healthy lifestyle.

“It’s important to maintain a normal body weight and avoid smoking,” Hermann said. “Smokers are twice as likely to suffer a heart attack as nonsmokers. Smoking also is linked to an increased risk of stroke. The nicotine and carbon monoxide in tobacco smoke damages the cardiovascular system. Also, women who smoke and take oral contraceptive pills are at a higher risk of heart disease and stroke.”

Herman also pointed out the failure to exercise can contribute to an increased risk of coronary heart disease. Physical activity helps control weight, cholesterol levels and diabetes. In some cases, it also can help lower blood pressure.

Engage in regular moderate aerobic exercise for at least 30 minutes five days per week. Another option is more vigorous workouts for at least 25 minutes three times per week.

High blood cholesterol and high blood pressure also are risk factors, particularly when combined with any other risk factors. Although your diet is one cause of high cholesterol and high blood pressure, other causes are inactivity, age and family history.

Adopting a diet low in saturated and trans fats and higher in unsaturated fats can help lower blood cholesterol. Also, help reduce high blood pressure by cutting down on salt intake.

Regular physical activity, maintaining a healthy weight and a diet rich in ample fruits, vegetables and whole grains also can help keep blood cholesterol and blood pressure down.

“Good heart health is something we all need to think about every day, and during American Heart Month is a great time to get a plan together to start improving your health,” Hermann said.



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