

The beat goes on

Some diet and lifestyle things you can do to maintain a healthy heart *by Bijal Thoda*

The heart is a vital organ of the circulatory system. It regulates blood pressure and other factors affecting the health of blood vessels, such as oxygen, stress, and blood sugar. In that vein, there are a number of key diet and lifestyle behaviours that impact heart health, including cholesterol, sodium, omega-3, physical activity, smoking, and alcohol. This article will look at the role of sodium, alcohol, and physical activity.

Reduce your sodium consumption

The sodium component of table salt is related to the risk of heart disease. You need a very tiny amount of sodium to maintain your health. However, on average, Canadians consume a lot more than the recommended adequate levels of the upper tolerable limit for health (1 teaspoon salt, or 2,400mg sodium). (approximately 1 1/2 teaspoons of salt, or 3,500mg sodium). Most Canadians consume approximately 1 1/2 teaspoons of salt, which contains 3,500 mg of sodium, while the healthy recommended range is between 1/2 teaspoon and 1 teaspoon of salt per day.

Sodium is often used as a preservative and thus it's present in most processed foods. Processed foods are largely responsible for excess sodium consumption, which increases your risk of high blood pressure—a condition known as hypertension. Hypertension is a proven risk factor for heart disease and stroke. For people with sodium sensitivity, restricting salt intake can control or even eliminate hypertension.

A few easy ways to cut down on salt, and sodium in general, is to swap processed foods—especially fast foods—with fresh natural foods such as fresh raw fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds. Avoid foods served at restaurants and food service outlets, which tend to be heavily laced with salt, sugar, and fat.

Read food labels. Check ingredient lists for sodium content when buying high sodium items such as sauces, gravies, dressings, condiments, soups, broths, snacks, baked items, canned vegetables/meats/fish, vegetable juices, processed meats (especially bacon), salted nuts and seeds, prepared or pre-seasoned mixes, and frozen dinners. Always look for low-sodium labels on grocery items.

When cooking, replace salt with lemon juice (which contains natural salts), vinegar, herbs, seaweeds, spices, or reduced salt

bouillon or broth. Avoid using your saltshaker at the dinner table.

The Canadian guidelines recommend a sodium intake of 2,000 - 3,000 mg for people over 44 years old with hypertension.

Don't drink excessive alcohol

Though there has been a lot of talk about the cardio-protective effect of red wine in low doses, it isn't related to the alcohol content, but rather the antioxidant property of the red pigment, which is called resveratrol. So, drinking alcohol isn't really recommended, particularly if you have coronary heart disease—excess alcohol is not only notorious for causing liver disease and cirrhosis, it's also linked to cardiomyopathy (diseases of the heart muscle) and high blood pressure.

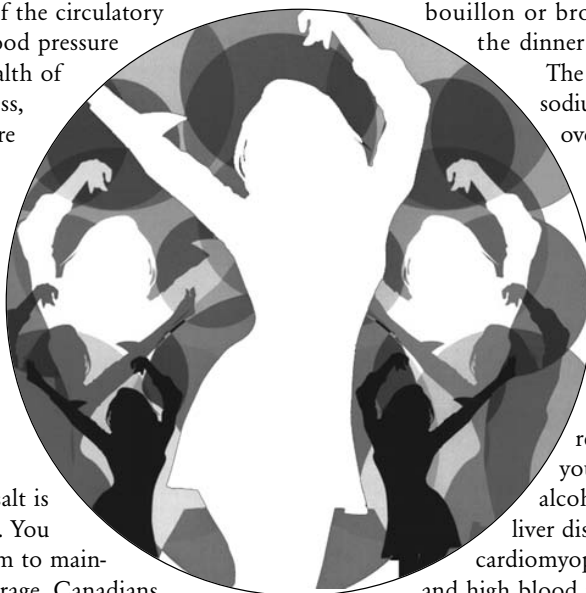
Water is the best choice of liquids. If you don't need to count calories, you could occasionally opt for some fresh fruit juice, too.

Get some exercise

Physical exertion helps improve circulation and oxygenation and is considered good for the heart. In fact, lack of physical activity is a risk factor for coronary heart disease. However, if you have significant underlying heart disease, you need to be careful, since too much physical stress can be dangerous.

Emotional stress can also have a detrimental effect on the heart under specific circumstances; this can potentially contribute to chronic heart disease or even precipitate an acute heart attack in people with heart problems. Yoga, Tai chi, Thai yoga massage, and similar therapies not only reduce stress and help you relax, they improve circulation and oxygenation and provide your mind and body with the workout it needs to keep the weight in check and optimize cardiac functioning.

So, maybe it's time to shake yourself a bit more, and give your saltshaker a rest. ☺



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