

Be Heart Healthy!

By

Carolyn Hendry Wyatt, Extension Agent III, Family & Consumer Science/4-H

With National Heart Month in February followed by National Nutrition Month in March, this month's column will feature Heart Healthy Nutrition. Formerly considered a man's disease, heart disease is the #1 killer of women in the United States and the leading cause of disability among women. The good news is heart disease is a problem everyone can do something about. There are two types of heart disease risk factors—those you can't change and those you can control. One risk factor that cannot be changed is a family history of early heart disease. However, many heart disease risk factors can be controlled by making changes in your lifestyle. Risk factors that you can control include:

- **Smoking** – Just one year after you stop smoking, your heart disease risk will drop by more than half.
- **High Blood Pressure** – Blood pressure consistently at or above 140/90 raises your risk of heart disease.
- **High Blood Cholesterol** – Two types are present in your blood: HDL, or "good" cholesterol, and LDL, or "bad" cholesterol. The goal should be to keep the good high and the bad low. Another key number is your total cholesterol, which should be less than 200.
- **Overweight/Obesity** – Even if you have no other risk factors, you are more likely to develop heart disease if you are overweight and/or obese, as well as putting yourself at risk for stroke, diabetes, and certain cancers.
- **Physical Inactivity** – A sedentary lifestyle increases your risk for not only heart disease, but diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and obesity.
- **Diabetes** – This is a major risk factor for not only heart disease, but stroke, kidney failure, and other diseases. Diabetes can be detected with a blood sugar test.

Be aware that if you have just one risk factor, you are much more likely to develop heart disease, with its many serious consequences. The first step is to see your doctor for a thorough checkup. Tell your doctor you want help in achieving your goal of heart health, and don't hesitate to ask questions.

The next step you can take to greatly improve the condition of your heart is to eat healthy. The **Dietary Guidelines for Americans**, which has a **Food Guide Pyramid**, helps you make healthy food choices. The **Dietary Guidelines** tell you to:

- **Choose a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol**, and moderate in total fat;
- **Choose a variety of grains daily**, especially whole grains;
- **Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables daily**;
- **Choose beverages and foods to moderate your intake of sugars**;
- **Choose and prepare foods with less salt**; and
- **IF you drink alcoholic beverages, do so only in moderation.**

The **Dietary Guidelines** also emphasize that you should aim for a healthy weight, be physically active each day, and keep food safe to eat. If you have high blood pressure or high blood cholesterol, you may need to make some additional lifestyle changes. Hopefully, this has opened your eyes to the steps needed to take control of your health. Fortunately, you have tremendous power to prevent heart disease, and you can start today. For more information you may find these **Web resources** helpful: www.nhlbi.nih.gov; www.americanheart.org, and www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/diabetes.html. You may also contact the Hardee County Extension Office at 863-773-2164 for more information on nutrition and health.