

3 Heart-Health Myths Busted!

Think what you're doing is good for your heart? Not necessarily. Here are some common mistakes to avoid

By Leslie Pepper

You choose healthy food, you work out at the gym and you still fit into your slim clothes. That means your heart is healthy, right? Not so fast. Even the smartest people make mistakes when it comes to keeping their ticker in tiptop shape for life.

MYTH 1

"FAT-FREE" MEANS HEALTHY.

Not necessarily, especially when it comes to processed foods. When manufacturers take the fat out of a product, they usually add in other ingredients, like sugar and sodium.

"You need to look closely at the labels," says Sean A. Spangler, MD, a cardiologist at Providence Spokane Heart Institute. "If you see sugar as one of the first or second ingredients, that's a sign there's too much."

Is *is* true that you should stay away from saturated fats and trans fats. The former are found in animal products (like beef, pork and full-fat dairy products); trans fats are found in hydrogenated and partially hydrogenated oils (usually used in commercially baked products, fast foods and processed foods). These fats raise your blood cholesterol and, in turn, your risk of heart disease.

Not all fats are bad for you—some you need. Monounsaturated (olive oil) and polyunsaturated fats (fatty fish such as tuna and salmon) have been found to lower the LDL (bad cholesterol) in the bloodstream and/or raise the amount of HDL (good cholesterol). The American Heart Association recommends eating between 25 and 35 percent of your total daily calories as fats.

MYTH 2

SOMEONE WHO EXERCISES HAS A HEALTHY HEART.

This is based on some truth, as it's absolutely true that exercise is an essential part of health. Studies show that for every hour of walking, life expectancy may increase by two hours. And a study published in the American Heart Association journal *Circulation* attributed as many as 250,000 deaths per year in the United States to a lack of regular physical activity.

But taking that walk doesn't give you license to be a couch potato the rest of the day. A study published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* found that the longer a person sat, the greater the risk of heart attack—regardless of how much exercise she or he did at other times.

Make sure you're moving throughout the day, not just during your time at the gym. Do your own gardening instead of hiring a landscaper. Walk to a friend's house instead of driving. Pace while talking on the telephone. Take breaks at work to stretch or move around. If possible, walk over to talk to a co-worker instead of emailing.

"And exercise does not allow you to smoke or eat in excess or engage in other unhealthy habits," says Dr. Spangler. "While exercise is one component to a healthy heart, it's not the only one."

MYTH 3

HORMONE THERAPY FOR A POSTMENOPAUSAL WOMAN SHOULDN'T BE USED; IT RAISES THE RISK OF HEART DISEASE AND CANCER TOO MUCH.

It used to be that when a woman reached menopause, she would be prescribed long-term hormone replacement therapy to, among other things, protect against heart disease. Studies have found that estrogen-plus-progestin therapy actually increased women's risk for heart attacks (as well as stroke, blood clots and breast cancer). And estrogen-alone therapy increased the risk for stroke and venous thrombosis and had no effect on heart disease.

"That being said, hormone therapy does provide relief from some menopausal symptoms," Dr. Spangler says. So much so that the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists says: "Women in early menopause who are in good cardiovascular health are at low risk" for heart attack and should consider hormone replacement therapy. Dr. Spangler agrees: "A woman who is early in her postmenopausal period and has a lot of symptoms is a good candidate for hormone therapy."

The Food and Drug Administration's recommendation for menopausal hormone therapy is that it should be used at the lowest dose for the shortest period of time to reach treatment goals. Speak with your doctor about your best personal course of action.

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HOW MUCH TO EXERCISE FOR A HEALTHY HEART?

To be sure you're protecting your ticker, the American Heart Association recommends one of the following amounts of exercise for keeping your heart healthy. Note: Established medical associations recommend more exercise than this for losing or maintaining weight.

- **30 minutes or more** of moderate-intensity aerobic activity at least five days per week
- **25 minutes or more** of vigorous aerobic activity at least three days per week
- A combination of the two

How are these defined? Aerobic activity uses the large muscles of your arms, legs and hips over an extended period. Doing something that causes your breathing and heart rate to increase to a moderate degree (like walking at a brisk pace, ballroom dancing, golfing) is considered moderate intensity. Doing something that causes your breathing and heart rate to increase greatly (like a step aerobics class, biking uphill, singles tennis) is considered vigorous intensity.