

# 10 Easy Steps to a Healthier Heart

BY MICHAEL F. ROIZEN, MD



If you do even just the first seven tips below (plus don't smoke, of course), you'll reduce your chance of having a heart attack compared to a typical person your age by as much as 90 percent!

## **1** Walk 30 minutes a day—every day, no matter what—and then call someone.

Walking 30 minutes a day decreases your risk of having a heart attack by about 30 percent. We don't know why it works, but I have found that if you succeed at walking every day, you can also succeed at doing other things for your health. If you start skipping, you start compromising your health in other ways. And calling someone about it every day is crucial; that's the real commitment. You want someone who's really supportive, who will not nag but will call you if you haven't called her. And by the way, it usually is a "her." Men tend to be lousy at this!

## **2** Know your blood pressure and do whatever it takes to get it down to 115/75.

Your blood pressure number may be even more important than your cholesterol number. And you can lower it yourself. The best way? Getting a little exercise and losing some belly fat. Why belly fat? The omentum is what hangs over the stomach. That fat feeds the kidney, liver and other vital organs. It is also correlated with fat inside the kidney capsule. Here's the hypothesis: When you gain weight, you put fat inside this tight sausage-like capsule. That pushes on the kidney, so the kidney says, "Hey, I need more blood pressure to drive blood through because I'm getting squeezed by the fat." So it releases hormones that cause increased blood pressure. Now, when you lose a little of that fat, even just a few pounds of weight loss, your blood pressure goes down really fast. Cutting back on salt may help, but for some

people, reducing sugar and saturated fat in the diet may help even more. Recently I coached a patient (he'll be on the PBS special *YOU on a Diet*, coming in March 2007) whose blood pressure started at 160/100, but he didn't have any arterial disease. In seven weeks he had his blood pressure down to 115/75 with just weight loss, walking and decreasing sugar and saturated fat in his diet. But for most people, if your blood pressure is over 140/90, and you're not going to do these other things reliably, then you should probably go on blood pressure medication. New drugs can reduce blood pressure without major side effects.

## **3** Eat an ounce of nuts a day.

Nuts raise HDL good cholesterol and decrease inflammation. But they have a heart benefit independent of those, too.

We're not sure why. Nuts have healthy omega-3 fatty acids, healthy protein and some fiber. And this tip is easy to do! You want nuts to be raw, fresh and unsalted. You really can develop a taste for them if you give them a chance. Walnuts are great. If you want to roast them, put them in the oven at 350 degrees for nine minutes. If you do it yourself it won't cause any bad fats or dangerous chemical acrylamides to form. Commercially roasted, salted nuts don't have as much benefit.

**4 Learn your HDL number and do what you can to raise it to 50.**

For women, some believe a high HDL is more important than a lower LDL. We have no idea why, but study after study shows that the higher the number, the better (50 is fine). Easy ways you can increase it: exercise; one drink a day; healthy fats, such as olive oil, canola oil and nuts. Pantothenic acid, or vitamin B5, may raise HDL, and it has no known toxicity. Niacin raises it, too, but beware of the flush—so start increasing the dose slowly. While the main function of statin drugs is to lower LDL, some also raise HDL.

**5 Eat 10 tablespoons of tomato sauce a week.**

This is one of my favorite tips. Tomato sauce is loaded with blood-pressure-slashing potassium. We're not talking about salty, fatty sauces or serving it with a huge serving of pasta! Keep it simple and healthy and get a great benefit.

**6 Floss your teeth regularly.**

Preventing periodontal disease prevents inflammation in your arteries, which helps prevent heart disease. Most people don't know that your oral health affects all your arterial health, and that includes blood flow to your heart, to your sexual organs, and maybe even wrinkles on your skin.

**7 Eat no more than 20 gm of saturated fat a day and as little trans fat as possible.**

Saturated fat and trans fats lead to inflammation in the arteries. It appears that



as long as you stay under 20 grams a day, you don't pay a penalty for it. A cinnamon roll or muffin may have about 7 grams. A 4-ounce slice of roast pork tenderloin has about 4 grams. Trans fats (hydrogenated oils), found in many processed and baked foods, are probably at least as bad as saturated fats, maybe a little worse. Thin slices of lean meat are healthier than baked goods loaded with trans fats.

**8 Read labels and throw out all food that has sugar in the first five ingredients.**

Most people get fooled by foods that are low in fat but high in sugar. The sugar causes inflammation. And if you eat more sugar than you need, it gets morphed into omentum fat, that is, the fat around the belly that is so dangerous. For a while in the 1990s, many women, in an effort to cut back on calories, used "low-fat" salad dressings that turned out to be loaded with calorie-laden sugar. And those dressings didn't contain any good fats, like olive oil, that are beneficial. Healthy fats are better than empty sugar calories. Fructose is bad because it doesn't get to your brain and turn off your hunger cells. It doesn't do anything but add calories. Of course, the sugar in fruit is fructose, but because it's in a complex carbohydrate, it's usually fine.

**9 Have a glass of wine or beer today.**

We're not sure why. We think it's an anti-inflammatory, but whatever it is, it's a consistent finding that people who are teetotalers have a higher risk of heart disease than people who drink a little, and people who drink a lot have little heart disease but tend to die of cancer. Seven drinks on Friday night is not the same as one every night! We know there are serious dangers to drinking, but still, any kind of alcohol, in moderation, is good for arteries.

**10 Eat nine servings of colorful fruits and vegetables a day.**

That comes with a lot of fiber, and you shouldn't increase to that amount all at once or people won't stay in the same room with you! That can give you a tummyache, too. But you'll adjust in two to six weeks. Make sure you wash fresh produce carefully and thoroughly. There are farmers' markets all over the country now. If you try fresh locally grown veggies prepared well, you'll be amazed at how good they taste.

**Bonus Points**

- **Consume 25 gm of fiber a day.** We're not sure why fiber decreases heart disease. We always thought it was because of its cholesterol-lowering effect. But its benefit is in addition to that. Whether it is replacing something else in the diet, like sugar, we don't know. But the more fiber you eat (up to a point), the lower your risk of heart disease. Soluble fiber like oatmeal does have a better effect on cholesterol than insoluble fiber like a potato skin.
- **Do 20 minutes of aerobic activity at 80 percent of your maximum heart rate three times a week.** The faster your heart rate recovers from its maximum, the healthier your heart is. If you've followed the first 10 tips for a while, try some interval training. The body is an amazing adaptor: What seems very hard at first gets easier rapidly. In just 90 days, you can get 50 percent of the total benefit as if you were doing it your whole life. A heart monitor is a fun way to observe how high you can get your heart rate and how fast it comes down.