



Eat, move and think your way to better heart health

You may have heard the adage that you are what you eat. That's true, but it only tells part the story. You are also what you do and even what you think. When you make sustained lifestyle changes, you reduce many risk factors that can lead to cardiovascular disease.



Nutrition

Meals like fish and chips, meat-laden pizza and the traditional full English breakfast are sometimes called “a heart attack on a plate.” While those tasty foods don't directly cause heart attacks—heartburn is a more likely result—they can contribute to the development of obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, all of which are risk factors for cardiovascular disease.

To eat your way to better heart health, try the Mediterranean diet instead. It's based on decades of research into why people in many Mediterranean countries are less likely to die of heart disease.³²

Mediterranean diet components: ^{33, 34, 35}

- Plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, legumes, nuts and seeds
- Moderate amounts of eggs, poultry, fish and dairy products (low-fat or fat-free)
- Limited amounts of red meat, sugar, refined grains and highly processed foods
- Olive oil instead of other oils, saturated fats or margarine
- A glass of red wine per day

The 80% rule: This rule of thumb can help you avoid overeating: When you feel 80% full, stop eating. That gives your digestive system time to catch up with your appetite.³⁶

Exercise^{37,38,39}

Aerobic exercise and strength training can be an essential part of being heart-healthy. Here's how being active helps:

- Burns more calories, helping you to lose weight
- Lowers blood pressure and resting heart rate
- Improves muscles' ability to draw oxygen from the blood so the heart doesn't have to work as hard
- Improves blood flow around the heart, reducing the risk of clogged arteries (atherosclerosis)

- Reduces the risk of diabetes and coronary artery disease
- Raises levels of HDL ("good cholesterol")
- Lowers stress levels
- Helps you sleep better

Aim for 30 minutes of moderate to intense exercise five days a week. Even 10- to 15-minute bursts of exercise make a difference, so start small and build from there.⁴⁰

Intensity level	Target heart rate	How it feels
Moderate	50-70% of maximum heart rate (220 minus your age)	You can talk but not sing You start to sweat after 10 minutes
Vigorous	70-85% of maximum heart rate (220 minus your age)	You can say only a few words at a time You start to sweat after a few minutes

Stress⁴²

Acute stress can in rare cases cause heart attack, while chronic stress can lead to behaviors that increase your risk of developing heart disease, such as smoking, abuse of alcohol and stress eating.

Rather than manage your stress by drinking or bingeing on bad-for-you comfort foods, seek out healthy alternatives that work for you. That might mean meditating, disconnecting from social media or taking long bubble baths. Exercise is another great option. Alongside its many other benefits, it releases endorphins, which can boost your mood.

Diet, exercise and stress reduction are among the best tools you have for improving your heart health. Talk with your doctor about specific steps you should take. At our Heart healthy resources hub, Aetna International members can find the information, tools and support needed to prevent and manage heart-related conditions. Aetna International members can also find help and resources in the Health Hub. For more information about your health care benefits, contact your plan sponsor or one of Aetna International's expert sales consultants for group business or individuals and families.

The beat goes on: Move more. Stress less. Live heart-healthy.

Heart-healthy resources hub: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/heart-health-support-resource.html>

Health Hub: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/members/login.do>

32 <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-weight/diet-reviews/mediterranean-diet/>

33 <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/nutrition-basics/mediterranean-diet>

34 <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/mediterranean-diet/art-20047801>

35 <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/mediterranean-diet-meal-plan#foods-to-eat>

36 <https://www.bluezones.com/2016/11/power-9/>

37 <https://medlineplus.gov/benefitsofexercise.html>

38 <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/7-heart-benefits-of-exercise>

39 <https://wa.kaiserpermanente.org/healthAndWellness?item=%2Fcommon%2FhealthAndWellness%2Fconditions%2FheartDisease%2FexerciseBenefit.html>

40 <https://www.healthline.com/health/heart-disease/exercise#1>

41 <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/in-depth/exercise-intensity/art-20046887>

42 <https://www.health.harvard.edu/heart-health/stress-and-your-heart>