As Valentine’s Day approaches, you should listen to your heart. Heart disease is the number one killer of men and women in the United States. Many risk factors can increase our chances for heart disease. Some things impacting our heart health can not be changed; heredity, gender, race, increased age and body type. However, we do have control over other factors that can have positive effects on the health of our heart and the hearts of our Valentines.

Here are some heart disease risk factors over which you can have influence:

- Smoking
- Obesity/overweight
- High cholesterol
- Diabetes
- Physical inactivity
- High blood pressure

To be your own Valentine, start today to reduce your risk for heart disease with small, simple actions like these:

**Celebrate with a checkup.** Let each birthday remind you that it’s time for your yearly checkup and a talk with your doctor about how you can reduce your risk for heart disease. Make sure to ask for your numbers – your readings for LDL, HDL, and total cholesterol; triglycerides and blood pressure.

**Get off the couch.** Step, march, dance or jog in place for at least 30 minutes daily or on most days of the week.

**Quit smoking.** Can’t go “cold turkey”? Cut the number of cigarettes you smoke each day in half; then cut that number in half again; finally, cut down to zero!

**Aim for a healthy weight.** Cutting out just 200 to 300 calories a day – about one candy bar – can help you lose up to two pounds a week and gradually bring you closer to a heart-healthy weight.

**Eat less fat.** Be moderate in the total amount of fat you eat. Remember less that 10% of your daily calories should come from saturated fat and steer clear of Trans fats. How? Choose low or no fat dairy products and lean meats. Instead of frying; bake, broil, microwave, roast, steam, grill, or lightly stir-fry using small amounts of olive oil or chicken broth. Limit processed foods and commercially baked goods, such as pastries, muffins, cookies, doughnuts and French fries.

**Limit foods high in added sugar.** This includes beverages and that means soda and tea sweetened with sugar.

**Eat plenty fruits and veggies.** Strive for five or more each day. Select a variety of colors and keep preparation simple. Fruits and veggies are high in vitamins, minerals and fiber.
Eat more fiber. In addition for fruits and veggies, choose brown rice, oatmeal and whole wheat breads and pastas. Additional high fiber foods include dried beans, peas and other legumes.

Become a salt detective. Check out the Nutrition Facts panel on packaged foods to see how much sodium (salt) they contain. Aim for a total intake of no more than 2,300 milligrams (about a teaspoon of salt) per day. Happy Valentine’s and Healthy Hearts Day!!!


If you have a question, write to Jo Shuford-Law, Extension Agent Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Florida/IFAS Extension--Leon County, 615 Paul Russell Road, Tallahassee, FL 32301-7099; or call the Extension Office 487-3006, between 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m. weekdays.

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