

Keeping Heart Disease at Bay

While we near the end of February and begin wrapping up American Heart Month, you may be wondering what you could do in the weeks and months ahead to help you keep heart disease at bay in the long run. The first step is to begin practicing proper heart health measures early on.

“If an individual has a problem identified at a young age, you can have a very significant impact on the outcome – 10, 20, or 30 years later. However, when people have already established disease, certainly in this day and age, there is still much that can be done,” says Dr. Christopher Powers, an OSF HealthCare cardiovascular disease specialist.

The American Heart Association (AHA) describes a modifiable risk factor as a major risk factor that can be modified, treated or controlled through medications or lifestyle changes. Some modifiable behaviors that can increase the risk for heart disease include unhealthy eating habits, overconsumption of energy drinks and alcohol, smoking, physical inactivity, weight, and high cholesterol.

One diet trend that has been on the rise over recent years is the ketogenic – or “keto” – diet. It is known for being low in carbohydrates and helping participants to lose weight quickly. The keto diet, however, is not only unsustainable, but is also not good for heart health, as it includes foods that are high in fat such as red meat, cheese, and nuts and cuts out many fruits and other nutrients needed for optimal heart and overall health, increasing your risk for heart disease down the line.

Dr. Powers says focusing on a well-balanced, sustainable diet that is also low in red meat and other fats is the key.

“Today everyone likes the fast food, snack food, processed food. Those things get to be very deeply engrained, especially with adolescents. As they grow up, they get used to it and it is what they want. So we have to be programmed away from that toward mainly plant-based, produce, fish – those are all the things that lessen your risk in the long term,” Dr. Powers advises.

Living a healthy lifestyle is the best way to reduce your risk for heart disease overall. Physical activity is important, as it gets your blood and heart pumping and keeps you physically fit, but does not necessarily mean you need to go to the gym every day. It can mean opting to walk instead of drive, taking the stairs instead of an elevator, parking at the end of the parking lot so you get a few more steps in – a compilation of basic, everyday things that can add to your physical activity throughout the day.

In addition to taking preventative lifestyle measures early on in life for your heart health, Dr. Powers also recommends making annual appointments with your primary care provider and having screenings and labs done to check cholesterol levels and blood pressure.

Getting a baseline of your heart health and continuing to monitor it over the years is important for your overall heart health down the line. If you are found to have increased blood pressure, high cholesterol, or anything else that might indicate a heightened risk for heart disease, your provider may send you for additional tests to further assess your risk in order to manage it early on.

“In a lot of cases now, we are also ordering what we call a calcium score. And that is to find out about early stage heart disease. It is a great way to find that out and it’s an easy test. It is a type of x-ray but very minimal type of radiation and just takes a few seconds. It will allow you to really be able to find out if you have early stage heart disease or are you somebody who doesn’t need any further attention – and we are talking about the asymptomatic individuals,” explains Dr. Powers.

Additionally, according to the American College of Cardiology, over 30% of heart disease cases are caused by genetic factors – which are different than modifiable risk factors. However, Dr. Powers stresses the fact that early intervention, including things like annual screenings and living a healthy lifestyle, can play significant roles in your overall outcome – even with the genetic risk factor.

“Even if somebody does have a very significant predisposition toward heart disease based on their genetics, this can be very successfully overcome by their lifestyle adaptation,” Dr. Powers says.

If you do not have a primary care provider, find one at www.osfhealthcare.org.