

## Young People and Heart Health

February is American Heart Month. For a long time, heart disease has been considered to be something that mainly affects adults over the age of 65. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), on average, U.S. adults have hearts that perform at a level about seven years older than they should. Because of this, the prevalence of heart issues in young people is increasing. In fact, according to the Cardio Metabolic Institute, one in five heart attacks occur in adults younger than 40 years of age.

Dr. Christopher Powers, an OSF HealthCare cardiovascular disease specialist, says that being proactive early in life is crucial to keeping your heart healthy for years to come. One piece of advice includes aiming to eliminate the overconsumption of energy drinks.

“Some people feel very attached to these kind of psychological addictions to the sports drinks. And it’s like anything else – if you overdo it, then most definitely we will see primarily the issue of blood pressure elevation. Most definitely that is tied to energy drinks,” says Dr. Powers.

A [study](#) by the American Heart Association (AHA) showed that people who drank 32 ounces of energy drinks in an hour had abnormal electrical activity in their hearts and higher blood pressure for up to four hours later. The average size of energy drinks found in grocery stores and gas stations can range anywhere from eight to 24 ounces – and many young people consume multiple energy drinks per day. Over time, this can be detrimental to your heart health.

While many of these drinks are marketed as healthy, labeled low calorie, or are promoted in the fitness industry, this does not mean they are good for your heart and blood pressure. And Dr. Powers advises that keeping your blood pressure at a healthy level is important for optimal heart health in the long run.

“The threshold for normal blood pressure has gone down over the years. So everyone should have a blood pressure less than 130. If you don’t, then your risk goes up. Over the age of about 50 or 55, roughly about one-third of all Americans have elevated blood pressure that’s not adequately treated, so that’s a big one,” Dr. Powers explains.

In addition to reducing energy drink consumption, there are other modifiable behaviors that can increase the risk of heart disease, including smoking, obesity, physical inactivity, and unhealthy eating.

For adults, the AHA recommends being active by getting in 150 minutes per week of aerobic activity, adding in moderate strength training when possible (which can simply mean using household items if you do not have a membership to a gym), and reducing the amount of time spent sitting in front of computer or TV screens. Even on a cold day, a brief walk outside is better than nothing as it gets your blood pumping. And when it comes to a heart healthy diet, Dr. Powers recommends greatly reducing red meats and processed foods from your diet. Starting these habits at a young age improves your chances of maintaining a healthy heart down the road.

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

While healthy lifestyle choices make a significant impact on your overall heart health, genetics also play a role to an extent – specifically blood pressure and [cholesterol](#) levels.

According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), an adult’s total cholesterol level should be 200mg/dL or less. However, according to the CDC, about 12% of adults age 20 or older already have total cholesterol levels higher than that. It is not too late, however, to get both your cholesterol levels and blood pressure on the right track early on in life, which is why Dr. Powers recommends having both of these checked annually beginning at a young age and continuing to monitor these levels throughout your lifetime.

So when should you start getting your cholesterol levels checked?

“That begins as early as age 20, so that should be a very standard part of anybody’s evaluation. Younger adults should get used to having that as part of their regular check-ups, as well as the blood pressure,” Dr. Powers says.

Dr. Powers recommends talking to your primary care provider if you have a non-modifiable risk factor for heart disease as they may recommend you see a cardiologist at that point – especially if it becomes hard to manage or if you have any significant underlying risk factors.

“Certainly the people who have any family history. For instance, if they have a parent who died suddenly at a young age – and again, talking about asymptomatic individuals – we like to see those individuals. People who have blood pressure that’s not easily controlled, we often times see those people. And then also cholesterol same thing if it is not under control – and those would be mainly the asymptomatic individuals,” he advises.

It is not too soon to start taking charge of your heart health. Find a provider at [www.osfhealthcare.org](http://www.osfhealthcare.org).