

American Heart Month: Top Takeaways

February is American Heart Month. As the month winds down, cardiologists hope that by raising awareness of heart disease, risk factors and prevention methods, the public can head into the year ahead armed with new heart health knowledge.

“I’m really happy that we’re taking the month of February to focus on heart disease,” said Dr. Merrick Donenberg, an OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute Cardiologist practicing in Ottawa, Illinois. “My goal is to reach as many people so that they never have to see me in person. I would love to be put out of a job because people are eating well, staying active and overall just being more healthful.”

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for men and women in the United States. According to the American Heart Association, 1 in 4 deaths is caused by heart disease. However, while genetic factors do play a part in cardiovascular disease, it can often be prevented. Dr. Donenberg says starting to change bad habits now can make all the difference.

“Estimates of 70 to 80 percent of all cardiovascular disease is preventable with good habits, dietary habits, lifestyle habits ahead of time,” explained Dr. Donenberg. “So we love to bring awareness to cardiovascular disease at a time when people are not having any issues at all, and so hopefully we can reach those folks, get them healthier, so they never need to see me.”

Dr. Donenberg adds it is never too early to start these healthy habits. Although children and teens usually don't show the symptoms of heart disease, the buildup of plaque can start in childhood and can have a serious impact on their adult life.

“Heart disease is largely thought of as a disease of older age, specifically patients over the age of about 65. But in reality, heart disease starts much younger,” said Dr. Donenberg. He continued, “Even in your teenage years we have evidence that early vascular disease can start in the teen years, where cholesterol starts to build up in the arteries of the heart, so by the time somebody actually comes to the attention of cardiologists at the age of 65 or 70 and have that heart attack, it’s really just a culmination of a process that’s been going on or started many, many decades earlier.”

Fortunately, parents can make a difference in their kids’ behavior by encouraging healthy eating and regular activity. Parents should also make a point to discourage smoking. Developing these habits early could set kids up for a lifetime of heart healthy habits.

“Convincing people early on that there’s an issue is very difficult, but I think it’s something that myself and really all physicians, not just cardiologists, it’s really our mission to try and get people to understand what’s going on, because it’s far better to treat these conditions early on in their disease course than later on down the road when there’s really somewhat limited options to what we can do,” said Dr. Donenberg.

To lower your risk for heart disease, Dr. Donenberg suggests:

- Watching your weight.
- Quitting smoking and stay away from secondhand smoke.

- Controlling your cholesterol and blood pressure.
- Getting active and eating healthy.
- Avoiding heavily processed foods.

For more information about OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute and to take a free Heart Health Risk Test click [here](#).