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Things to Take to Heart on Valentine's Day [1]

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Since today is Valentine's Day, there seem to be pink and red hearts everywhere you look. But whether love is in the air (or not), these shapes and decorations can serve as a great reminder for all of us to look after our hearts—in more ways than just the romantic one.

A healthy heart is important no matter if you are trying to reduce your cancer risk, have recently been diagnosed with cancer, or are a cancer survivor.

Reducing your cancer risk. According to a [2013 study conducted by the American Heart Association](#) [2], the same healthy habits that protect against heart disease also protect against cancer, helping reduce cancer risk by 38%. This study lasted for 13 years and followed more than 13,000 healthy volunteers.

For people who have been diagnosed with cancer. A healthy heart is able to handle cancer treatment better than an unhealthy one.

For cancer survivors. One of the most common and serious long-term side effects [3] of cancer treatment is heart problems, such as inflammation (swelling) of the heart muscle, congestive heart failure (a condition where the heart has problems pumping blood), or heart disease. These are most often caused by radiation therapy to the chest and/or chemotherapy with drugs from the anthracycline family, which includes doxorubicin, epirubicin, idarubicin, and daunorubicin.

No matter which group you fall into, the recommendations from the experts to keep your heart healthy before, during, and after cancer treatment are pretty much the same:

(1) Watch what you put on your plate.

You can increase the heart healthiness of your diet by reducing the amount of salt, saturated and trans fats, and cholesterol found in the foods you eat. Choose to create meals with lots of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. You can also include low-fat dairy products, poultry (chicken or turkey, for example), fish, legumes (like beans, lentils, or black-eyed peas), non-tropical oils (such as olive or canola oils), and nuts.

(2) Get up and be active.

Adding just 30 minutes of physical activity that gets your heart pumping and makes you breathe harder to your daily routine at least five times per week is enough to improve your health. How do you know if you're working hard enough? You should be able to talk, but would prefer not to. Walking is a great way to get started. Other forms of moderate-intensity exercise include biking and housework.

(3) Keep your blood pressure within the healthy range.

According to the American Heart Association [4], high blood pressure is the single most important risk factor for heart disease. When your blood pressure stays within the healthy range (less than 140/90 and higher than 100/50 mmHg), it reduces the strain on your heart, arteries, and kidneys, which keeps you healthier for longer. It's important to realize that low blood pressure is not good for your health either and can lead to dizziness, fainting, lack of blood flow to the heart, or even kidney failure.

(4) Reduce blood sugar levels.

High blood sugar levels (diabetes or pre-diabetes) and heart problems often go hand-in-hand. When blood sugar levels are too high for too long, they damage not only the heart but also the kidneys, eyes, and nerves. To keep this from happening, it is important to cut back on the amount of sugar you consume, which means limiting the amount of soda, candy, and sugary desserts you indulge in. Regular physical activity (see above) and taking prescribed blood sugar medications or insulin as recommended by your doctor are also important.

(5) Reach and maintain a healthy weight.

Too much fat, especially around the waist, increases your risk of having high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes, which, as we've just discussed, isn't good for your heart. If you've been told by your doctor that you are overweight or obese, even losing five or ten pounds can dramatically reduce your blood pressure.

(6) Stop using tobacco?no butts about it.

Smoking damages the entire circulatory system, which increases the risk of heart disease, hardened arteries, aneurysms, and blood clots. Over time, smoking also reduces good cholesterol (HDL) levels and lung capacity, making it harder to exercise and keep your body healthy.

(7) Create and stick to a follow-up care plan.

If your cancer treatment plan has increased your risk of developing heart problems, talk with your doctor about how often you should be tested because you may not experience any signs or symptoms. Screening tests to find heart damage include physical examinations, [electrocardiograms \(EKG or ECG\)](#), and [echocardiography](#) [5] (a test that uses sound waves to evaluate the heart). All cancer survivors, especially those who received treatment for [Hodgkin lymphoma](#) [6] as children, should tell their doctor if they have chest pain because it may be a sign of a heart problem.

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[2] <http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/early/2013/03/13/CIRCULATIONAHA.112.001183.abstract>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25396>

[4] <http://mylifecheck.heart.org/Multitab.aspx?NavID=12&CultureCode=en-us>

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