



60th Anniversary Of American Heart Month Celebrated In February

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ALTON - February is American Heart Month – a time when the nation spotlights heart disease, the No. 1 killer of Americans. February is chosen because it is a time when many people reflect on matters of the heart, including love and relationships. It's a fitting opportunity to also emphasize the importance of heart health.

Heart Month has a long history dating back to the 1960s when it was initiated by the American Heart Association (AHA) in the United States. Since then, it has grown into an international observance, with various countries and organizations participating in heart health awareness activities.

February 2024 marks the 60th anniversary of American Heart Month. President Lyndon B. Johnson, among the millions of people in the country who'd had heart attacks, issued the first proclamation in 1964. Since then, U.S. presidents have annually declared February American Heart Month.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. One in five deaths is due to heart disease, even though the disease is largely preventable.

“Keeping your heart healthy starts with living a heart-healthy lifestyle. But first, you need to get smart about your heart,” says Laurinda Harjai, DNP, FNP, RN-BC, cardiology nurse practitioner with OSF Medical Group – Cardiology in Alton.

“Knowing what causes heart disease, what puts you at risk for it, and how you can reduce those risks can help you make informed decisions to protect your heart and keep it strong.”

Improving heart health involves making conscious choices to reduce risk factors and adopt heart-healthy habits. Some ways to promote heart health during Heart Month and beyond include:

- **Eat a Balanced Diet:** Consume a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy products. Limit saturated and trans fats, sodium, and added sugars.

“Eating lots of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, using fat-free or low-fat dairy products, and limiting foods high in saturated fat or sugar-sweetened beverages are all part of a heart-healthy diet,” Harjai says.

- **Exercise Regularly:** Engage in physical activity for at least 150 minutes per week. Activities like walking, cycling, and swimming can help improve cardiovascular fitness.
- **Quit Smoking:** If you smoke, seek support to quit smoking. Smoking is a major risk factor for heart disease.
- **Manage Stress:** Practice stress-reduction techniques such as mindfulness, meditation, or yoga to reduce the impact of stress on your heart.
- **Monitor Blood Pressure:** Check your blood pressure regularly and work with your healthcare provider to manage it within a healthy range.

“High blood pressure is also known as hypertension, and often called “the silent killer,” occurs when your blood pressure is consistently 130/80 mm Hg or higher,” Harjai explains.

- **Control Cholesterol:** Maintain healthy cholesterol levels by following a heart-healthy diet and, if necessary, taking prescribed medications.

“Cholesterol helps make hormones, vitamin D, and substances to help you digest foods. Your body needs it for good health, but in the right amounts,” Harjai states.

- **Maintain a Healthy Weight:** Achieve and maintain a healthy weight through a combination of balanced eating and regular physical activity.

“Your body mass index, or BMI, shows if your weight is in a healthy range for your height and is one measure of your future risk for heart disease. To strengthen their heart, adults should aim to get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity such as brisk walking each week,” Harjai suggests.

- **Limit Alcohol Consumption:** If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation. Excessive alcohol consumption can contribute to heart problems.
- **Get Adequate Sleep:** Aim for 7-9 hours of quality sleep per night to support heart health. Not getting enough sleep or getting poor quality sleep on a regular basis increases the risk of having high blood pressure, heart disease, and other medical conditions.
- **Diabetes Management:** Poorly controlled diabetes increases cardiovascular risks.

“Knowing your own risk factors for heart disease can help guide your lifestyle choices, so talk to your healthcare provider to make sure you’re clear. Just as important: know your numbers. Your weight, waist size, blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels all affect your heart,” Harjai contends. “If they aren’t where they should be, make a pledge to begin improving them.”