

Stay Heart Healthy During Heart Awareness Month

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ALTON - February is Heart Awareness Month, and Laurinda Harjai has a few tips to keep your heart healthy.

Harjai, a cardiology nurse practitioner with OSF Medical Group, explained that Heart Awareness Month is a good chance to think about your health and make adjustments where needed. She encourages all patients to keep an eye on their blood pressure and cholesterol levels, to stay active, and to follow up on any concerns they might have.

“I think it’s a good time to bring awareness,” Harjai said. “When was the last time I saw my primary care doctor? What has my blood pressure been? What is my cholesterol? Do I have diabetes and not know it? I think it’s really important to follow through.”

Harjai explained that she always tries to get a feel for her patients’ lifestyle and family history, both of which can contribute to one’s likelihood of developing heart disease or another heart-related issue. Smoking is a major concern, but so is sitting. Harjai said many patients have a sedentary lifestyle, and even just a few lifestyle changes can increase your activity and make a big difference to your heart health.

“I encourage patients, ‘Hey, if you’ve had a sedentary lifestyle, we’re not going to go couch to 5k overnight,’” she said. “But if we can just go from maybe 1,500, 2,000 steps a day and work our way up to what we want to see, like 8,000 to 10,000 steps a day. Take the stairs, park farther away, those types of changes. When it comes to physical activity, I think it’s the baby steps and working your way back up because you don’t want to have muscle fatigue and really do too much day one.”

Harjai added that it’s a good idea to make sure your other health concerns are managed before you make these other changes. She encourages patients to partner with their healthcare provider to manage their diabetes, blood pressure or other issues, then patients can partner with other people in their life to get active and take care of themselves.

More often, Harjai is seeing younger patients who have heart disease or other heart issues because of smoking, an unhealthy “American diet” or other causes, she said. Many of these patients are in their 20s and 30s and might even have heart attacks at a young age. But while this is concerning, Harjai wants people to know that their lives can still be full and long if the disease is managed properly.

“Really, 20% of patients that have heart disease are young,” she said. “I think it’s never too young to really just keep in touch with your primary care provider, first off, and consider all of those other risk factors and see a cardiologist when needed...I really focus on reinforcing and encouraging the younger population who have heart disease and heart issues that there’s wonderful medications, technology, and we can make the heart strong again if it’s weak. We can combat the things that are attacking the heart, for lack of a better word, and help patients to really recover either their heart function or manage the disease process so they can go on to be parents, grandparents and live long healthy lives.”

Ultimately, Harjai wants people to stay aware of their heart health all the time, not just during Heart Awareness Month. She hopes people will continue to implement healthy lifestyle choices and monitor any diagnoses they might have.

And if you have any concerns? Speak up, Harjai said. It's better to be safe than sorry.

“Patients will come in and say, ‘What if it’s just indigestion?’ And I always say, ‘What if it's not?’” she added. “I’d rather let’s do the workup, let’s do the tests and give you peace of mind and get the right answers. So don’t hesitate, don’t push it to the back burners. If you have a concern, it’s likely legitimate. So reach out to your primary care provider and they’ll work with us if you need to be seen by a cardiologist.”



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