



Start a Heart to Heart

It all starts with the heart. Your heart keeps blood moving through your body, which is essential to keeping you alive. You can't see it, so you may not think of it often. Perhaps it's time you did.

Heart disease causes 1 in 3 deaths in men and women in the United States. Primary care physicians (PCPs) can give a broad overview of how to care for your heart and can diagnose cardiovascular diseases from high blood pressure to heart valve problems and heart attacks. More advanced heart issues may require more specialized care.

Heart disease is becoming more prevalent in every age group. Doctors are especially seeing this in people under the age of 50, a group not traditionally thought of as prone to heart issues. It's important to see a PCP every year, and to make sure that your heart and your whole cardiovascular system are operating well. The fact that we don't notice our heart working may mean it's working well. But heart disruptions can happen for a number of reasons.

People who have a history of heart issues like palpitations, high blood pressure, or abnormal heart rhythms should see their PCPs yearly — or perhaps more frequently — to make sure their hearts are not developing other issues. Those who have a family history of heart disease also will want to pay closer attention to try and prevent any damage to this delicate but hardworking organ.

Those who have had heart surgery, or have more serious heart issues or diagnosed heart problems, may need to be under the care of a cardiologist. A cardiologist is a doctor who specializes in finding, treating and preventing diseases of the heart and blood vessels. Ask your PCP if you need to see a cardiologist. A good rule of thumb is that people with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, preeclampsia, gum disease, and/or swelling in the feet or legs should want to be under the care of a specialist. Smokers and people with family histories of heart disease are also good candidates for the more specialized care a cardiologist can provide.

Keeping your heart healthy is a lifelong process you can work on every day. Maintaining good heart health, or working to achieve it, consists of two things: eating right and regular exercise. The American Heart Association* recommends at least 30 minutes of exercise a day, as well as including four-and-a-half cups of fruits and vegetables, and three ounces of fiber-rich whole grains in your diet every day. Limiting sodium, sugar, processed meats and saturated fats is also important for good nutrition.

Talk with your PCP about whether you need to see a cardiologist. If you are just starting out with lifestyle changes, or are thinking about doing so, a doctor who specializes in heart health may be the best person to advise you. He or she can offer specialized and detailed advice on how to lessen the odds of cardiovascular disease and keep your heart beating smoothly and regularly.

**The American Heart Association is an independent organization that offers health information that you may find helpful.*

