

February is American Heart Month



This month we celebrate many things: Valentine's Day, Groundhog Day, and Presidents' Day to name a few. As we go about addressing all of those Valentine cards, delivering roses and heart shaped boxes of chocolates, and spying on that elusive groundhog, we may not even realize that February is also American Heart Month. All month long, thousands of volunteers in accordance with the American Heart Association will work to raise funds for research and education. Along with their fundraising, they will be distributing information and awareness about heart disease and stroke. Because cardiovascular disease is the number one cause of death among Americans, the message that they are spreading is an important one. Although heart disease is most common in adulthood, our overweight and obese children are also at risk.

Heart or cardiovascular disease is the term commonly used to describe many different conditions that affect the heart or the blood vessels, especially those veins and arteries leading to and from the heart. Some of these conditions include atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, hypertension, elevated blood cholesterol, coronary heart disease, and stroke. Although some people are genetically predisposed to heart disease, there are a lot of other factors that can increase your risk such as smoking, uncontrolled high blood pressure, overweight or obesity, and doing little or no exercise. Because many of these risk factors begin at an early age, it is important to give children the tools to keep their hearts healthy long into adulthood.

Here are some tips that, when followed, can lower your family's risk for heart disease:

- Don't smoke! Cigarette smokers have a much greater chance of getting heart disease. Smoking also almost doubles your risk of stroke.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Follow a heart healthy diet that includes plenty of whole grains, fruits, vegetables and lean protein. Choose unsaturated fats such as olive and canola oils and limit your intake of saturated fats like butter and margarine.
- Get plenty of exercise. The American College of Sports Medicine and the American Heart Association now recommend that all healthy adults aged 18-65 years need moderate physical activity for a minimum of 30 minutes on five days each week or vigorous activity for at least 20 minutes three days each week. Children over the age of 2 years should get at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise on most if not all days of the week according to the USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services. To encourage exercise, limit video games, computers, and television time. Get the whole family active and plan outings that encourage them to get moving!

By starting heart healthy habits right now, you will enjoy long term benefits. The best way to encourage children to adopt healthy habits is to become a positive role model yourself!

For more information, visit the American Heart Association at www.americanheart.org

