

# Heart Smart: *Easier said than done?*

By DR. AMY DAVIDOFF

We all know what we “should” do to have a healthy lifestyle and reduce the risks of heart disease. Eat well, exercise, lose weight, control your high blood pressure and blood lipids (cholesterol and triglycerides), control your diabetes, stop smoking, control your stress. Wait, what? Stress? What does stress have to do with heart disease?

The stress response is essential for our survival, so how can chronic stress be bad for us? The stress response includes being fearful of danger and paying immediate attention to our surroundings. Our brain and the rest of our body get geared up to run away or stay and protect ourselves (often referred to as “fight or flight”). Our cardiovascular system is central to this response. Our hearts start beating faster; blood flows more toward the tissues we may need, such as our brains and our muscles. We also mobilize stored energy sources such as glucose (sugar)



in case we need it to support our activities quickly.

Our cardiovascular system has evolved to take care of the tissues that are most in need of blood flow at any

given time. After a big meal, we often feel a little sleepy. That results, in part, from blood flow being directed more toward tissue that is digesting the food and storing it, rather than to other parts of the body. If there is a sudden need to act quickly, say, if a bear comes around and decides he would like some lunch also, our cardiovascular system can shift gears. Blood is redirected to your muscles so you can respond to make sure you are not the lunch. We can digest that hamburger later when we are safe.

This process is not just in response to a physical threat. Think about a runner who is getting ready to start a race. She prepares mentally, and before the body requires energy (e.g., before the race starts) the racer’s heart is beating faster and the body is preparing for stress. This is known as an anticipatory response. It is an appropriate reaction that helps us prepare for a short-term event.

But now think about chronic stress. The heart pounds and blood pressure is elevated over a long period of time. As mentioned above, this is a good thing for a short time, but really bad if sustained for a long time. In addition to increasing the risk of a stroke or a heart

attack because of this constant pressure, we are also reducing our immune system and increasing our blood sugar levels. These events work against good heart health over the long run.

Some researchers say that we only have so many heartbeats in a lifetime. One estimate is that your heart beats 100,800 times a day (70 beats per minute; 1,440 minutes per day) and about 37 million beats per year. This translates to about 2.5 billion heartbeats over the course of 70 years. If you only have so many, maybe we should save them. In actuality, we do not know if there is a finite number of times our hearts can beat, but it makes sense not to stress the system too much.

So what can we do about it? You can lower your risk factors. Simple, right? Improving your diet, starting an exercise program and lowering your stress are great New Year’s resolutions, but how many of us stick to them?

In the first semester of medical school at the University of New England, we ask our students to evaluate their health habits and set some goals to help them cope with the stress of their schooling while maintaining a healthy lifestyle (as best as possible).

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Most of them assess their diet and exercise routines. We find that the student doctors make two common mistakes when setting these goals. First, the goals are not quantifiable (measurable). Eating more fruits and vegetables, getting more exercise, losing weight, taking time off from studying. Those all sound like good goals, but how will they know when they have reached their targets? The second mistake they often make is they set goals that are too large and unrealistic, and they soon give up in trying to attain them.

So rather than setting a goal of eating more healthy food, they are asked to quantify what they plan on doing. For example, add one piece of fruit to their diet every day; take a 10-minute walk in the middle of the day; or take a 10-minute study break. What will small, measurable goals do? They will help us be aware of one to two things that we can change toward helping our hearts, without it being overwhelming.

They can help us change unhealthy habits in a way that is realistic and sustainable. We want to do this over the long haul, not just in fits and starts. Denying ourselves things we love is not realistic, but if we start cutting down on portions or swap an apple for potato chips twice a week, it is a start. I can live with that. How about you?

Living a long and healthy life is a worthwhile goal, but achieving those goals are often difficult. Do not set unrealistic expectations. Take small steps at a time. Set short-term, measurable goals and see how you do.

*Amy Davidoff is professor of biomedical sciences, College of Osteopathic Medicine, University of New England*



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Making your annual New Year's resolution? This year, try something new – something that takes a little effort but delivers big.

Try hitting the floor – your pelvic floor. No gym membership required. This is one set of muscles you can exercise virtually any time, anywhere: in the car, at your desk, in line at the grocery store, even during long elevator rides.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises (PFME) can help strengthen the muscles under the uterus, bladder and bowel, which tend to weaken after childbirth and around menopause. If you've experienced bladder leakage – one in three women will at some point in their lifetime – PFME is first line treatment, according to the American College of Physicians and the American Urologic Association.

Dr. Leslie M. Rickey, associate professor of urology and obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive sciences at Yale University, says there are many benefits to strengthening the pelvic floor, including:

- Reducing or eliminating the urine leakage that happens during exercise or with a cough, sneeze, or laugh.
- Improving sexual function; women with pelvic floor muscle strength report having stronger orgasms and more sexual satisfaction.

## 5 reasons to restore your pelvic floor

- Reducing symptoms from pelvic organ prolapse.
- Improving core strength and stability.
- Improving muscle control and confidence.

How do you get started, especially if you've tried kegels and been frustrated? Here are some suggestions from Stacey Futterman, PT, MPT, WCS, a nationally recognized physical therapist specializing in pelvic floor physical therapy and founder of 5 Point Physical Therapy PLLC in New York City.

1. First, find the right muscles to tighten. A good way to do this is to relax, then tighten the muscles you use to control urine flow or stop gas from happening. You shouldn't see anything else tighten, such as your thighs, when you are contracting the right muscles. It should be easy and never produce discomfort.

2. Keep in mind the "relaxing" portion

of the exercise is just as important as the contraction. Over-clenching can shorten muscles of the pelvic floor.

3. Be sure to keep your abdominal, buttocks and thigh muscles relaxed while doing pelvic floor muscle training exercises. Then, when you get good at isolating these muscles, you can begin to use these muscles simultaneously while doing other exercises such as squats and lunges, or anything that is part

of your regular exercise routine.

4. Commit to a daily schedule of exercising just 2 minutes, or three sets of 10 reps a day.

5. If you do not see results after six to eight weeks, or have any discomfort while doing the exercises, consult with a physical therapist or a health care professional, or consider a home training system that provides biofeedback. The PeriCoach System ([pericoach.com](http://pericoach.com)) is cleared by the FDA and has been evaluated by OBGYNs, general practitioners, and physical therapists. It is a device and smartphone app you can trust to take the guesswork out of PFMEs by measuring the muscles that matter, tracking your progress and reminding you to exercise.

Make this the year to take control of your pelvic floor health and experience the benefits.