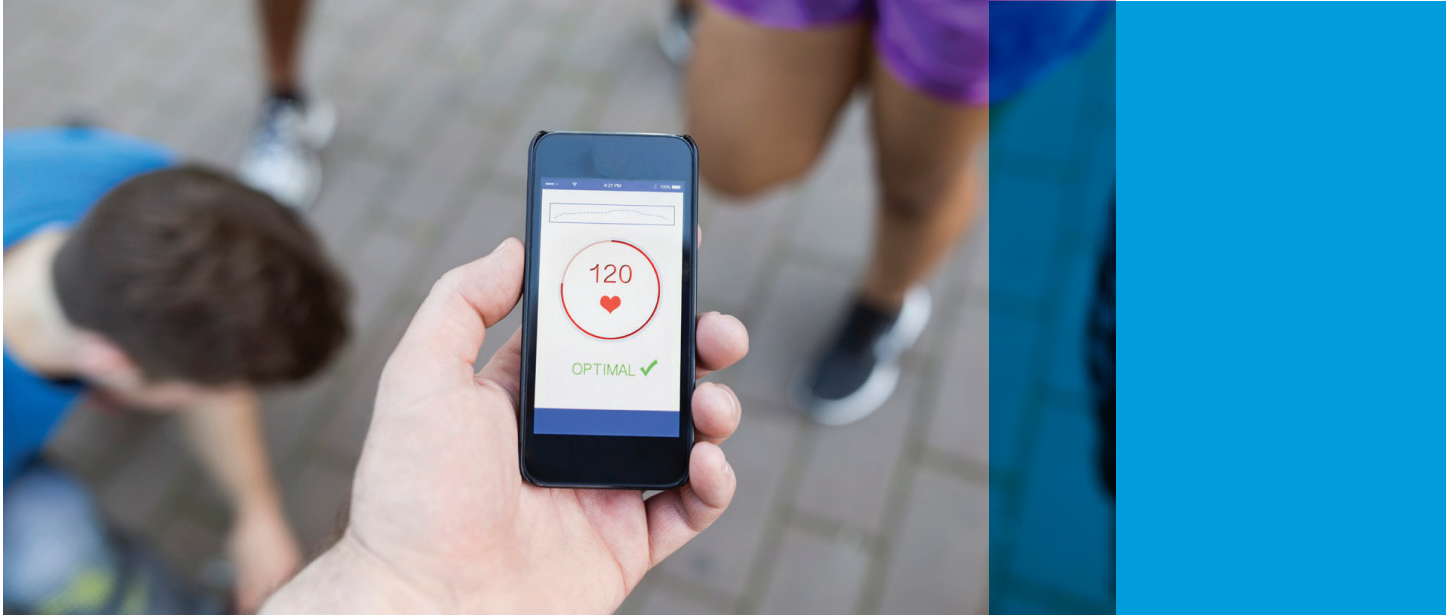


The strong beat of your heart



Making eight positive lifestyle changes

A grateful heart

Your heart is a muscle. You can do so many things to make that muscle stronger. You may not realize how some bad habits can harm your heart over time—and how some good habits can help your heart perform like a champion. Don't think about starting too late or doing too little. Your heart will be grateful for any improvements you make in being healthier.

Here are seven lifestyle changes that can help give you a strong heart to live and love longer:

1. Stop smoking

The link between smoking and heart disease is well documented. Cigarettes aren't just bad for your lungs, they can put you at much higher risk for developing coronary heart disease than non-smokers.¹ Yes, it can be difficult to quit smoking but don't give up on giving up cigarettes—it's one of the most important things you can do to keep your heart healthy.

2. Do more cardiovascular exercise

Regular, moderate-to-vigorous aerobic activity helps reduce the risk of heart disease. To lower the risk for heart attack and stroke, the World Health Organization and other experts recommend doing at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (such as brisk walking) throughout the week. That is the equivalent of 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week.² Don't have that much time to set aside during the day? No problem. You can do two or three segments of 10 to 15 minutes per day and still get good health benefits.

The heart loves cardiovascular activity, which is any activity that makes the heart and lungs work harder. That covers a lot of fun activities to try, indoors and out: walking, running, biking, swimming, even jumping rope.

3. Maintain a healthy weight

People who have excess body fat—especially around the waist—are more likely to develop heart disease and stroke even if they have no other risk factors. Studies have shown that losing even 5 percent of body weight may reduce your risk factors.³ Many people struggle with losing weight, but it's one of the most important things you can do to keep your heart healthy.³



4. Manage your cholesterol

Cholesterol is actually a substance the body produces naturally. But some people produce too much of it, and others add to their cholesterol with poor choices. Too much cholesterol can “clog up” blood flow to the heart muscle with a buildup of plaque on the inner walls of the heart’s arteries. This plaque buildup can lead to a condition called atherosclerosis, which causes the arteries to narrow and harden. Fortunately, most people can actively reduce their cholesterol levels through a combination of diet and exercise. It’s not just about cutting back on foods that are high in cholesterol. You should also cut back on foods that are high in saturated fat and choose high-fiber foods that can help lower your cholesterol.⁶

5. Manage your blood pressure

Blood pressure is the force of the blood pushing against blood vessel walls. Your blood pressure can rise temporarily from stress, or high blood pressure can be a chronic, sustained condition. Either way, you probably won’t be able to tell your blood pressure is elevated unless you check it with a blood pressure monitor. If your blood pressure remains elevated, it increases the heart’s workload and contributes to developing atherosclerosis. There are many lifestyle changes you can make that can help lower your blood pressure: losing weight, increasing physical activity (especially cardiovascular activity), and using less salt in your food.⁷ However, if your blood pressure doesn’t come down and stay down through lifestyle changes, it is extremely important to see your doctor.

6. Reduce stress

You may be surprised to learn that prolonged stress can contribute to heart disease. Excess stress can contribute to high blood pressure. People often manage stress in unhealthy ways, such as overeating and smoking, which can damage the heart over time. You may think that stress is unavoidable. But there are many options for helping to reduce stress throughout the day—taking a walk, meditating, deep breathing and stretching.⁸

7. Manage your diabetes

If you’ve been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, studies suggest that you may be at a higher risk for developing cardiovascular disease.⁴ Even when glucose levels are under control, diabetes increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. But your risks are even greater if your blood sugar is not well controlled. Whether or not you’re on medication for diabetes, lifestyle changes can help you better manage your diabetes. The top lifestyle changes for people with diabetes are: maintaining a healthy weight, following eating recommendations for diabetes, and getting regular exercise.^{4,5}

1. American Heart Association, “Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics – 2020 Update: A Report from the American Heart Association,” *Circulation*. 2020;141:e139-e596.

2. World Health Organization, “Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health,” accessed September 2020

3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Healthy Weight, Nutrition, and Physical Activity – Losing Weight,” August 2020

4. World Heart Federation, “Risk Factors Fact Sheet,” May 2017

5. American Diabetes Association, “Standards of Medical Care in Diabetes - 2020,” *Diabetes Care*, January 2020

6. <https://www.webmd.com/cholesterol-management/guide/cholesterol-basics>, accessed March 2021

7. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/high-blood-pressure/in-depth/high-blood-pressure/art-20046974>, accessed March 2021

8. <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/16-ways-relieve-stress-anxiety>, accessed March 2021

The information and materials included in MetLife’s Health and Wellness Information Library, including all toolkits, modules, template communications, text, charts, graphics and other materials, (collectively, the “Content”) are intended to provide general guidance on health and wellness matters and are not, and should not be relied on as, medical advice. While the Content is based on resources that MetLife believes to be well-documented, MetLife is not responsible for the accuracy of the Content, and you rely on the Content at your own risk. Each person’s condition and health circumstances are unique, and therefore the Content may not apply to you. The Content is not a substitute for professional medical advice. You should always consult your licensed health care professional for the diagnosis and treatment of any medical condition and before starting or changing your health regimen, including seeking advice regarding what drugs, diet, exercise routines, physical activities or procedures are appropriate for your particular condition and circumstances.