

What do you want for Valentine's Day?

By Debbie Wolff, NSCA-CPT, AFAA, CPTS, RYT

The greatest gift you can give or receive this month is that of a healthy heart. February not only contains the most romantic holiday of the year, but since 1963 has been proclaimed ***AMERICAN HEART MONTH***.

Cardiovascular disease is our nation's #1 killer. What are the causes and what are the cures?

Amongst the major risk factors for developing **Coronary Artery Disease (CAD)** is physical inactivity. Coronary Artery Disease is characterized by fatty deposits, cholesterol, calcium and other substances in the inner lining of the arteries (atherosclerosis) that supply blood to the heart. Cholesterol is produced in our liver and is also found in foods from animals (egg yolks, meat, poultry and dairy products to name a few). Cholesterol is described as LDL (Low-density lipoprotein) the "bad" cholesterol, and HDL (High-density lipoprotein) "good" cholesterol, and the ratio of HDL to LDL is an important factor in terms of risk. It is also a health risk to have a low HDL as it is to have a high LDL.

Other risk factors include:

- High blood pressure
- Cigarette smoking
- Diabetes
- Obesity
- High levels of triglycerides
- Family history

Almost all of these risk factors, with the exception of family history, can be lessened or reduced with regular moderate physical activity. Regular aerobic

activities have been **proven** to lower high blood pressure. Smokers who become more physically active are more likely to cut down their smoking, or completely stop smoking. People who are overweight are more likely to develop Diabetes; therefore regular activity may help to decrease insulin requirements for diabetic individuals. Exercise can help lower triglyceride levels and increase HDL cholesterol levels.

What is moderate physical activity?

According to the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), 30 minutes of moderate cardiovascular activity (50-85% of your maximum heart rate) on most days will substantially lower the risk of heart disease, or maintain health.

Moderate exercise means working hard enough to increase your heart rate yet being able to carry on a conversation.

Moderate activities may include gardening and housework and can help the otherwise inactive person reduce their risk for heart disease. Walking and dancing can be considered moderate activities, so almost anyone can exercise!

More intense exercise could include brisk walking, hiking, aerobic exercise, and running, cycling, and swimming. The training effects of these activities performed on a regular basis for longer periods of time, or at a greater intensity, can greatly benefit ones' long-term health.

So, what can you do to be proactive and prevent heart disease?

If you haven't had a physical in more than 1 year (of course if you suspect you may have one or more risk factors for heart disease), see your physician. Have a complete physical including the appropriate blood work-up to screen for high cholesterol and triglyceride levels. Check your blood pressure! Ask the appropriate questions for your physician- what can I do to prevent heart disease? What foods can I eat to control my cholesterol levels?

Once you have your physician's approval – start an exercise program! ACSM guidelines include strength training at least twice weekly. Seek the advice of a

certified personal trainer to guide you on your path to a healthy heart, or to begin a new fitness regime and optimize your workouts. Ask your trainer if they hold an NSCA or **ACSM** certification or a national certification of good standing, and if they understand the effects of exercise on the heart.

Make your health and the health of your family the most important gift for 2011 – your children need to begin their road to health and fitness **NOW** – not later when they have already seen the effects of lack of exercise and poor eating habits. Give your Valentine the gift of fitness.

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