



Have a heart-healthy Valentine's Day

On Feb. 14, hearts are the star of the show. Why not plan a heart-healthy Valentine's Day? These 4 ideas can get you started:

1. Roses are red...and so are strawberries. Dip them in dark chocolate for a treat that's delicious and heart-healthy too.

To cook up a colorful dinner, consider bright red produce:

- Apples.
- Beets.
- Cherries.
- Grapes.
- Peppers.

2. Exercise is key to a healthy heart. So why not plan an active date with your sweetheart? Skate hand-in-hand around the local ice rink. Chop and stack wood for the

evening's romantic fire. Dance the night away. And make a pact to exercise together.

3. Help soothe stress. It can cause heart-related health issues—like higher blood pressure. Good gifts for reducing stress include:

- Passes to a local gym.
- A gift certificate for a massage.
- Some scented soap to use in the bath.

4. Kids are sweethearts too. So set a healthy example for your little ones. For school parties, help kids choose healthy treats.

Valentine's Day comes just once a year. But it's a great reminder to strive for a lifetime of healthy hearts.

Sources: American Heart Association; American Institute for Cancer Research; Produce for Better Health Foundation

How much do you know about cholesterol?

Do you know how to keep your cholesterol at a healthy level? These 4 must-know facts can help you get started.

1. Your body needs cholesterol.

This waxy substance is found in every cell in the body. It aids in vital functions like digestion.

Too much cholesterol can cause problems though. It can clog your blood vessels. People break down fats differently. But eating fatty foods makes cholesterol build up in your body. It can build up in arteries and lead to heart disease and stroke.

2. There are good and bad types of cholesterol.

Low-density lipoproteins, or LDL, are the bad kind. When LDLs get deposited in your arteries, the arteries become narrow. This can cause heart attacks and strokes.

HDL, or high-density lipoproteins, are known as the good kind. HDL carries cholesterol from other parts of the body to the liver, where it can be removed. Higher levels of HDL mean you have a lower chance of getting heart disease.

3. Getting a cholesterol screening is important.

It is important for

everyone to be informed about their cholesterol levels. Your genetics play a big role in how much good and bad cholesterol your body makes.

Contra Costa Health Plan follows the recommendations from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force for cholesterol screening. These recommendations are different for men and women. Screening is recommended for men 35 years and older and for women 45 years and older.

4. To help control your cholesterol, cut down on foods high in saturated and trans fats.

Those include:

- Fatty meats.
- Baked goods (like cookies and cakes).
- Solid fats, such as butter.

You should also get plenty of exercise, reach and maintain a healthy weight, and not smoke. Most people can reduce their bad cholesterol enough by diet and exercise without using medications.

Talk to your doctor if you have more questions about how to keep your cholesterol levels healthy.

Additional sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; National Institutes of Health



Contra Costa Health Plan complies with applicable federal civil rights laws and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, or sex.

ATTENTION: If you speak a language other than English, language assistance services, free of charge, are available to you. Call **877-661-6230** (California Relay for hearing-impaired: **800-735-2929**).

El Plan de Salud de Contra Costa cumple con las leyes federales de derechos civiles aplicables y no discrimina por motivos de raza, color, nacionalidad, edad, discapacidad o sexo.

ATENCIÓN: si habla español, tiene a su disposición servicios gratuitos de asistencia lingüística. Llame al **877-661-6230**, opción 2, o al California Relay, el número para personas con discapacidad auditiva: **800-735-2929**.



How to choose healthy fats

Did you know? Fat's not all bad. In fact, a little fat is good for your health. And some types of fat may even help improve it. Other fats can harm your health if you eat them too much.

Here's a closer look at these bad and good fats.

The bad guys: Saturated and trans fats. These fats raise LDL blood cholesterol. That's the kind that puts you at risk for heart attack and stroke. The two types are:

Saturated fat. This is found mostly in animal products. Think red meat and full-fat dairy. It's also in some plant foods, like coconut oil and cocoa butter.

Trans fat. This is found in foods with hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. It's in snacks like cookies and chips. It

helps them have a long shelf life. Trans fat is also in some fried foods.

The good guys: Unsaturated fats. These fats can improve your cholesterol levels. The two main types are:

Monounsaturated. Foods that contain these fats include:

- Olive and canola oil.
- Nuts.
- Peanut butter.
- Avocados.

Polyunsaturated. Foods that contain these fats include:

- Salmon.
- Tofu.
- Safflower, sunflower and corn oil.

Serve up some good health. To help keep your diet focused on the good fats:

- Eat more fruits, veggies and whole grains—and less red meat.
- Switch to low-fat or nonfat milk.

HEARTFELT ADVICE

Know your numbers

Talk with your doctor about your personal risk of heart disease. Here are four types of numbers to know—and to keep an eye on:



BLOOD PRESSURE.

High blood pressure makes your heart and blood vessels work harder.



CHOLESTEROL.

Unhealthy levels can raise your risk of a heart attack.



BODY MASS INDEX (BMI).

BMI is an estimate of your body fat based on your weight and height.



BLOOD SUGAR.

When your blood sugar is high, it can lead to diabetes, which is a major risk factor for heart attack.



NEED A DOCTOR? We've got you covered. Search for a provider online at contracostahealthplan.org

Sources: American Heart Association; National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

- Cook with olive, canola or other oils.
- Eat fish at least twice a week.
- Choose soft spread instead of butter. Look for "0 grams trans fat" on the label.
- Make sweets a rare treat.

Sources: Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics; American Heart Association

Four ways to help prevent a heart attack

Is your heart healthy?

Heart disease, which can lead to a heart attack, is still the nation's top killer. Anyone can develop heart disease. But you may have a higher risk if you:

- Smoke.
- Don't exercise much.
- Have an unhealthy diet. That means lots of saturated fat, trans fat and sodium.
- Weigh too much.
- Have high blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes.

4 ways to help your heart.

The good news? You can lower your risk for a heart attack. That's true even if you already have heart disease. Some first steps:

1. Get to know your doctor. Most of us only see the doctor when we are sick or in pain. We forget that a doctor visit is a good time to talk about preventing illness.

In Latin, the word *doctor* means *teacher*. Your doctor can teach



you how to keep yourself healthy. Do you have diabetes, high blood pressure or high cholesterol? Ask your doctor how to control it.

After a doctor visit, write down what you discussed—especially about medications. If something about your meds does not feel right, call your doctor before you decide to stop taking them.

2. Make heart-healthy changes. Eat more vegetables of many different colors—like red peppers, orange carrots and yellow squash. Eat a variety of fruits too. Avoid foods with a long list of ingredients,

and replace white bread with whole-grain options. Switch to low-fat milk and lean meats.

Try to get some exercise every week. Walking is one easy option.

As you slowly make these changes, you will feel better—and you'll help protect your heart.

3. Kick a bad habit. If you smoke, ask your doctor about options to help you quit. Quitting smoking is hard, but there are medications and programs to make it easier.

Contra Costa Health Plan covers nicotine patches, nicotine gum, nicotine lozenges, bupropion (Zyban) and varenicline (Chantix) without prior authorization. Your doctor will help you decide which option is best for you.

4. Shed a few pounds, if you need to. What is a heart-healthy diet? One key part is not to eat too much food or too much of one type of food. Avoid junk foods and fast foods because they have a lot of salt in them. Salt increases blood pressure, which harms your heart. Ask your doctor what a healthy weight is for you.

Sources: American Heart Association; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Start your kids on a heart-healthy path

You're there to help your children with their homework. And you remind them to brush their teeth.

But have you helped them do something good for their hearts lately?

You may think heart health is a grown-up concern. But it's never too early to start forming heart-healthy habits.

It's true that kids rarely get heart disease. But the process leading to adult heart disease can begin in

childhood. That includes the slow buildup of fat and other substances in the arteries. It can put kids at risk for a heart attack or stroke when they grow up.

Other risk factors that can start in childhood:

- Obesity.
- Type 2 diabetes.
- High cholesterol.
- High blood pressure.

Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics; American Heart Association; UpToDate



February is love-your- heart month

We're surrounded by hearts this month. Along with the paper and chocolate versions, there are the human ones: the beating hearts of more than 300 million Americans.

Unfortunately, we're also surrounded by heart disease. In the U.S., it's the leading cause of death for both men and women. But it can be prevented and controlled. Even in a short month's time, you can do a lot to take better care of your heart.

Week 1: Choose good food. First, look for foods without nutrition labels. That means lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. They are low in fat and sodium, and they contain fiber, which can help prevent high blood cholesterol. Next, choose whole grains and foods low in sugar. Your body gets the most nutrition from these foods, without extra calories.

Unhealthy fats and cholesterol can clog arteries. To avoid these

risks for heart disease, read nutrition labels when you're grocery shopping. Skip foods with saturated fat and lots of salt and sugar.

Week 2: Get moving. Exercise improves your health in many ways. A big one: It reduces your risk of heart attack and stroke. Moving more also helps prevent diabetes and helps with weight loss. And you don't need a gym or expensive equipment. All you need is to get outside and walk. A solo walking habit can be relaxing. But exercising with a friend or in a group can help you stick to it.

Like all muscles, your heart needs exercise. Twenty to 30 minutes daily is ideal. Challenge yourself by walking faster or going up a hill. Share your heart-healthy habit with a loved one—invite him or her to join you on a walk.

Week 3: Know your numbers. If you don't know your blood pressure and cholesterol numbers, make

an appointment this week with your doctor to have them checked. Having high blood pressure or too much LDL cholesterol (the bad kind) in your blood can put you at risk for heart disease.

Being overweight also makes heart disease more likely. You probably know if you're carrying too many pounds. But if you aren't sure, it's another thing to discuss with your doctor.

He or she can advise you on lifestyle changes or medicines to help you achieve heart-healthy numbers in all 3 areas.

Week 4: Vow to quit. Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death. Smoking affects the blood flow by destroying the lining of the blood vessels, which may increase the risk of forming arterial clots.

A heart attack is caused by a blockage in a vessel that supplies blood to the heart. A heart attack usually causes a squeezing pressure in the chest, often accompanied by difficulty breathing.

A stroke is caused by a blockage in a blood vessel in the brain. A stroke causes confusion, an inability to move a part of your body or an inability to speak.

Smoking also destroys lung tissue. Over time, you cannot get oxygen into your body and always feel out of breath. Smoking increases your risk of developing many types of cancer. So if you smoke, it is important to quit.

Stopping is not easy for most people, but help is available. Call the California Smokers' Helpline at **800-662-8887** or go to **nobutts.org**.

Sources: American Heart Association; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute



Five ways music can make you healthier

Music's historic role in healing has led researchers to consider ways music may improve our health and well-being. Scientists have discovered that listening to music increases positive emotion through the reward centers of our brain, sending out chemicals that can make us feel good.

Below are 5 ways that music seems to impact our health and well-being:

Reduces stress and anxiety.

Research has shown that listening to music with a slow tempo can calm people down during highly stressful or painful events.

Though it's sometimes hard in studies to separate out the effects of music versus other factors, like the positive impacts of simple social contact, one recent study

found that music had a unique contribution to make in reducing anxiety and stress in a children's hospital.

Decreases pain. Music has a unique ability to help with pain management. A 2013 study measured the effect of music on people diagnosed with fibromyalgia, a disease causing severe musculoskeletal pain. The people who listened to music once a day for a month experienced considerably more pain reduction than the group who did not regularly listen to music.

May improve immune functioning. Wilkes University researchers looked at how music affects levels of IgA, an important antibody of our immune system. Undergraduate students had their

salivary IgA levels measured before and after 30 minutes of exposure to four conditions: listening to a tone click, a radio broadcast, soothing music or silence. Students exposed to the soothing music had significantly greater increases in IgA than those exposed to the other conditions, suggesting that exposure to music might improve natural immunity.

May aid memory. Music enjoyment causes dopamine release. Dopamine is a chemical used by the brain that is related to motivation, which is associated with learning and memory. This evidence has led researchers to study the impact of music on special populations, those who have memory loss due to illness.

In a study, caregivers and patients with dementia were randomly given 10 weeks of singing coaching, 10 weeks of music listening coaching, or neither. After the 10 weeks, testing showed that the music listening coaching group improved mood, orientation and memory.

Helps us exercise. In a study, oxygen use levels were measured while people listened to different tempos of music during their exercise on a stationary bike. Results showed that when exercisers listened to music with a beat that was faster and in harmony with their movement, their bodies used up oxygen more efficiently.

This article originally appeared on *Greater Good*, the online magazine of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley.

Source: greatergood.berkeley.edu



The results are in

WE'VE RECEIVED COMMENDABLE ACCREDITATION LEVEL RECOGNITION FROM THE NCQA

National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) tells health plans how well they serve you. And Contra Costa Health Plan (CCHP) is doing well. We've earned Commendable status from NCQA. And we're 1 of only 4 Medi-Cal plans to achieve this distinction!

It's a long process. NCQA sends a team of trained health care experts, including doctors. They do an on-site survey of the health plan.

NCQA also looks at:

- Health plan records.
- Member surveys.
- Interviews with plan staff.
- Performance on HEDIS® measures.

Earlier this year, CCHP celebrated the renewal of our

NCQA accreditation. At that time, we achieved the Accredited status. Commendable status is a step up from that. We're proud to offer great service to our members. And we aim to always do better. You can help us by answering surveys and sharing your feedback.

NCQA is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to improving health care quality. NCQA accredits and certifies a wide range of health care organizations. It also recognizes clinicians and practices in key areas of performance. NCQA is committed to providing health care quality information for consumers, purchasers, health care providers and researchers.

Advice nurses and urgent care

If you are sick or hurt, you may need urgent care. That means you need quick care, but it's not an emergency. Not sure what kind of care you need? Call the Advice Nurse line.

We're here to help Contra Costa Health Plan members. We are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, including holidays. Just call **877-661-6230, option 1.**

If you're calling for your child, make sure your child is with you when you call.

Depending on your symptoms, you may be eligible for the following:

- An urgent care visit.
- A telephone call with a CCHP doctor.
- An order for meds.

Nurses can also give you advice on:

- Test results.
- Questions on health care and meds.
- Infectious disease exposure.
- Caring for yourself or a family member.
- Current vaccine info for you or your child.
- Health resources in your community.



» WE'RE HERE TO HELP
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Valentine's Day strawberry love muffins

Makes about 18 muffins.

Ingredients

- 2½ cups of whole-wheat flour (or gluten-free flour)
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon fine-grain sea salt
- Zest of 1 fresh lemon
- ½ cup coconut oil (packed and measured solid)
- 2 teaspoons of stevia
- 1 large egg
- 2 large egg whites
- 1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lemon juice (about half a lemon)
- 12 ounces or 1⅓ cups of low-fat plain Greek yogurt
- 1 16-ounce package of fresh strawberries (washed, dried, hulled and chopped into bite-size pieces)

Directions

- 1.** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Use a large muffin pan and spray it with cooking oil or use muffin liners instead. Set muffin pan aside.
- 2.** In a small bowl, whisk the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt and lemon zest. Set aside.
- 3.** Using a stand or hand mixer, mix the coconut oil and stevia together until light and fluffy. Slowly beat in the whole egg, then the egg whites, one at a time, until well mixed. Drop the speed down



to low and gently stir in the lemon juice.

- 4.** Keeping the speed on low, slowly add the flour mixture, then a bit of the yogurt, alternating between the two, until the mixture is just incorporated.
- 5.** Then gently mix the berries into the batter. The batter will be very thick.
- 6.** Using a large cookie scoop or a large spoon, scoop the batter into the tins so they are about 90% full.
- 7.** Bake for 20 to 25 minutes or until a toothpick inserted into the middle comes out clean. Allow the muffins to cool in the tins for 10 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

Source: eatingwell.com

HEALTHY ideas kids will love



Visit the farmers market

Encourage kids to pick out a new fruit or veggie to take home and try.

Make a splash that's not soda

Flavor water with fresh berries or orange slices.



Stock a snack drawer

Older kids can help themselves to whole-grain crackers, unsalted nuts, and dried or fresh fruit.



Create a sports zone

Keep balls, jump ropes and other fun gear in one go-to location.

