

Jasper School District Health News

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You know that eating a healthy diet and exercising regularly are important habits for a [healthy heart](#). But did you know that you could still be undermining all your efforts with some surprisingly common bad habits?

“A number of activities that people don’t think twice about can have a negative impact on heart health,” says Kevin R. Campbell, MD, a cardiac electrophysiologist at North Carolina Heart and Vascular, UNC Health Care in Raleigh. Check out this list of heartdamaging habits to see if it's time to make changes to your routine:

1. Sitting All Day

Compared to people with an active lifestyle, those who don’t move enough and tend to sit for five hours or more each day have double the risk for heart failure, according to a study published in January 2014 in the American Heart Association (AHA) journal [Circulation: Heart Failure](#).

If your job requires sitting at a desk all day, get up and take a five-minute walk every hour. This small tweak in your routine can keep your arteries flexible and blood flowing properly, protecting against the negative effects of being sedentary, according to an Indiana University study published in August 2014 in [Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise](#).

2. Overindulging in Alcohol

Drinking too much alcohol can lead to high blood pressure, stroke, and obesity — all of which increase your risk for heart disease. The AHA reports that excessive drinking — more than two drinks a day for men and one drink for women — can interrupt your normal heart rhythm and cause heart failure. It’s okay to enjoy the occasional cocktail or glass of wine, but you can protect your heart by sticking to the AHA guidelines.

3. Stressing Too Much

Stress spurs the body to release adrenaline, which temporarily affects how your body functions — your heart rate increases, and your blood pressure may rise. Over time, too much stress can damage blood vessels in the heart and increase your risk for heart attack and stroke, Dr. Campbell says.

To minimize the harmful effects of stress, the AHA recommends the following:

- Find a release. Share your feelings by talking with a trusted friend or family member.
- Exercise. Relieve mental tension by engaging in physical activity. Aim for about 30 minutes of [moderate-intensity exercise](#) on most days of the week.
- Plan your day. Prioritize tasks and plan ahead to help prevent rushing to get everything done.

4. Not Flossing

Your dentist is right: Flossing is important — but not just for your teeth. A study published in May 2014 in the [Journal of Periodontal Research](#) found that people with coronary heart disease who flossed experienced fewer cardiovascular problems. What's the connection? Certain studies, including one published in July 2013 in [International Scholarly Research Notices](#), show that bacteria associated with gum disease promote inflammation in the body, and inflammation has been associated with increased risk for heart disease, Campbell explains.

A variety of flossing tools are available to make the task a little easier in hard-to-reach areas, from flossing picks to threaders that guide the floss.

5. Overdoing It on Salt

Excessive sodium can lead to high blood pressure, a risk factor for heart disease, Campbell says. Avoiding the saltshaker isn't too difficult, but what about hidden sodium? The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) reports that processed foods — including canned vegetables and soups, [lunch meats](#), frozen dinners, chips, and other salty snacks — account for most of the salt Americans consume. Be sure to read nutrition labels and compare products, choosing the one with the lowest percent daily value for sodium. A rule of thumb to follow: The AHA recommends that most people consume less than 1,500 mg of sodium per day.

6. Not Getting Enough Sleep

Your heart works hard all day, and if you don't get enough sleep, your cardiovascular system doesn't get the rest it needs. Your heart rate and blood pressure dip during the first phase of sleep (the non-REM phase), then rise and fall in response to your dreams during the second phase (REM sleep). These changes throughout the night seem to promote cardiovascular health, according to the NHLBI.

Chronic sleep deprivation can also lead to high resting cortisol and adrenaline levels, similar to levels that you experience in a stressful situation, Campbell explains. He recommends that adults get 7 to 8 hours of sleep each night. Teens and young adults should aim for 9 to 10 hours, he says.

Make Your Heart-Healthy Changes Stick

“Lifestyle changes are a process and do not occur quickly,” says Frank J. Sileo, PhD, a psychologist at The Center for Psychological Enhancement in Ridgewood, N.J. In fact, according to a study that appeared in the [British Journal of General Practice](#) in 2012, it

takes about 66 days for a practiced behavior to become a habit. So practice patience and follow these steps to make your heart-healthy changes stick:

Write out a list of the changes you want to make. Putting goals down on paper makes them tangible and creates a guide you can follow, Dr. Sileo says. Just be sure you're as realistic and specific as possible.

- **Break down your goals into manageable milestones.** Don't try to make all the changes at once. "Most people run into difficulties and failure when they try to change too much too fast," he says. Make sure each milestone feels attainable.
- **Gradually add new changes.** When a change starts to become second nature, add another goal. Keep doing this until you reach the end of your list.

If you experience a setback, don't give up. Remember that as changes turn into habits, you'll be on your way to the ultimate goal: maintaining a healthier heart.