

At the age of 20, I was put in the very difficult situation of helping my mom pick out the casket for my dad's funeral. He was only 54 when he died from heart disease. The last several years of his life were a race to make up for years of less-than-healthy eating habits, minimal cardiovascular exercise, stress, exhaustion and smoking.

I wish I knew then what I know now about the disease that takes the lives of 600,000 Americans a year. Over 700,000 people in the US have heart attacks each year. Heart disease is the number one killer of women in America. There are many factors that can increase a person's risk for heart disease.

Smoking, being overweight or obese, physical inactivity, high cholesterol and high blood pressure are all risk factors that contribute to heart disease. Unlike genetics and gender risk factors, these risk factors can be controlled if we make heart-felt choices throughout our life. Some of those choices are easier than others, but making the right choice regarding each risk factor can save your life and ease the concern your loved ones may have for you.

Stop smoking- People who smoke are six times more likely to suffer from a heart attack than those who don't smoke. For women who quit smoking, they can cut their risk for heart disease in half in just the first year! The monetary gains are significant, as well. With an average pack of cigarettes costing \$5.83, smoking a pack a day will cost more than \$2,100 each year. For resources to quit smoking, visit your doctor or go to www.smokefree.gov.

Maintain a healthy weight- This will not only help reduce your risk of heart disease, it is a great way to prevent and control many other diseases and conditions, such as diabetes, sleep apnea, and stroke, to name a few. It is estimated that about 2/3 of American adults are overweight or obese, putting them at a high risk for heart disease. To reduce body fat and reach a healthy weight, control portion sizes, reduce fatty foods, and exercise regularly.

Get moving- Being physically active has many benefits. Not only can it lower your body fat, it can also reduce your risk for high cholesterol and high blood pressure. People who are inactive are two times more likely to develop heart disease than those who are active. Try to incorporate 30 minutes of moderately-intense aerobic exercise each day. If you can't fit in a full 30 minutes, break it down into three 10-minute sessions. Aerobic activity should be done no less than in 10 minute increments.

Reduce blood cholesterol- When you get a cholesterol screening, three types of measures are typically reported: LDL (Low-Density Lipoprotein), HDL (High-Density Lipoprotein), and Triglycerides. Generally speaking, you want your LDL numbers to be low and HDL levels to be high. Your total cholesterol levels should be less than 200 mg/dl. Regular exercise and a diet low in cholesterol and saturated fat can help lower cholesterol levels. Visit with your doctor to have your cholesterol levels tested.

Lower blood pressure- Blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of arteries. By reducing this pressure you can lower the risk of heart disease. To prevent high blood pressure, reduce your sodium intake to less than one teaspoon a day (2,300 mg) in added salt. You also need to take into consideration the amount of salt in pre-packaged foods when you follow that guideline.

Source: North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, [Heart Health](#), S., Lynn.

Celebrate life, enjoy family, and live longer by getting regular check-ups, being physically active, eating smarter and making **heart**-felt choices to reduce your risk of heart disease. Try this heart-healthy recipe to get you started:

Marvelous Minestrone

Ingredients:

- 2 Tbsp. olive oil
- 4 to 6 cloves garlic, minced or pressed
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 medium carrots, chopped
- 4 -5 stalks celery, chopped
- 2 Tbsp. chopped fresh parsley
- 4 to 6 Tbsp. fresh basil, chopped (or 2 tsp. dried)
- 1 tsp. dried oregano
- 1 tsp. black pepper (or to taste)
- 1 tsp. salt (or omit and add at the table, if desired)
- 3 ½ Tbsp. red wine vinegar
- 2 Tbsp. honey or brown sugar
- 5 to 7 c. water or stock
- 4 medium sized fresh tomatoes, diced (or 1 ½ c. canned diced tomatoes)
- 1 ½ c. green beans, cut or snapped into 1-in. pieces
- 2 c. cooked kidney beans, rinsed and drained
- 4 oz. broken spaghetti, cooked (can use whole grain spaghetti, cooked)

Directions: Heat olive oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add the garlic, onion, carrots, celery, parsley, basil, and oregano and sauté several minutes, until fragrant. Add pepper, salt, vinegar, sweetener, water or stock, tomatoes, and green beans. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to low and simmer until vegetables are tender but not

falling apart, (~30 minutes.) Add the kidney beans and cooked pasta and heat through. If the soup is too thick at this point, add more water or stock to thin it. Serve with freshly grated Parmesan or Asiago cheese, crusty French bread, and a crisp green salad. Serves 8.

Nutrition information per serving: 8 servings per recipe: Calories: 213, Protein: 7 g. Total fat: 3.7 g. Carbohydrates: 37 g. Cholesterol: 0 mg. Sodium: 297 mg. Vitamin A: 55% DV. Vitamin C: 23% DV.

Recipe adapted from: *Rolling Prairie Cookbook*, O'Connor, Nancy. Spring Wheat Nutrition Education Services, Lawrence, KS. 1998. pg. 114