

Fun Fact of the Week

Six Heart-Healthy Tips for February, American Heart Month*

By Brant Secunda & Mark Allen, Neighbor

February is American Heart Month. It provides a wonderful opportunity for us to focus on the organ that beats around 3 billion times, nonstop, in the average human lifetime. Your heart keeps you alive. It sends life-giving oxygen, nutrients, and natural medicine through your bloodstream to all parts of your body.



That's what your heart does for you. What have you done for your heart lately?

Why not take this month to pay attention to your heart's health? Here are six ways to do it.

Exercise to support, not strain, your heart.

We often believe that exercising more and faster is better. Not so. New [research](#) has found that lower-intensity exercise (staying just below your target heart rate) is healthier than exercise that's high stress and high intensity. The research found that athletes who overdo it can develop scarring of the heart over time.

Take time to relax and rejuvenate in nature.

Stress is bad for the heart. At least once a day, if you can, go outdoors and connect with nature. Breathe in fresh air and feel the sun on your skin. Doing anything outside, whether it's taking a hike or sitting in the park, significantly reduces stress hormones and lowers blood pressure, which benefits your heart.

Connect with friends and family.

How is being in community with loved ones good for the heart? Connecting with others helps you keep a positive attitude even in the middle of stressful life challenges. The heart is the seat of your emotions; it's where love, bonding, connection, and intimacy originate. By spending time with others, you have the opportunity to give and receive love, and that's good for the heart too!

Eat more heart-healthy foods.

There are certain foods that are heart protective because they contain omega 3 and other healthy

fats, critical vitamins and minerals, and fiber and phytonutrients that help keep heart tissues healthy. Here's a partial list of foods you should eat more of: salmon, ground flaxseed, oatmeal, black or pinto beans, raw almonds and walnuts, and brown rice. Among the many heart-healthy fresh fruits and vegetables, these are especially beneficial: orange vegetables, spinach, broccoli, tomatoes, asparagus, orange fruits, and blueberries.

Get 6-8 hours of sleep at night.

A recent study found that getting too little or too much sleep is bad for the heart, increasing one's risk for heart disease. (Read study [here](#).) However, there's another good reason to work on getting the right amount of sleep. Sleep washes away any negatives from the day before and helps you feel charged up and ready to go for the next day. It's really true that troubles always seem easier to deal with after a good night's sleep.

Laugh, smile, and play.

To our sometimes cynical modern ears, it may seem silly to just laugh your problems away. But scientists have found ample evidence for the health benefits of lightheartedness and optimism for healing and fighting off illness. Seeking happiness-producing activities is a good way to relieve stress, enjoy others' company, and feel better. Give it a try this month. It will do your heart good.

* <https://patch.com/california/santacruz/bp--six-heart-healthy-tips-for-february-american-heart-month>