



** This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/sound-living-healthy-heart>

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Healthy Hearts: K-State expert outlines steps to reduce risks of heart disease

For more than 100 years, heart disease has been No. 1 cause of death in U.S.

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news

MANHATTAN, Kan. – In 2023, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 702,880 men and women in the United States died of heart disease, nearly 100,000 more than those that died of cancer and one-half million more than died in unintentional accidents.

The fact that heart disease was the No. 1 cause of death in the U.S. is really no surprise, however: “It has been the leading cause of death in the U.S. for more than 100 years,” said Erin Martinez, an adult development and aging specialist at Kansas State University.

Heart disease, she said, can affect people of all ages, and the most common risk factors include high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, diabetes, obesity and smoking.

“Many of the significant risk factors for heart disease can be modified by our own behavior, including our diet and how we’re treating our bodies,” Martinez said. “So knowing how to address those risk factors is very important.”

February is recognized in the United States as National Heart Health month, an effort to bring greater awareness to ways that Americans can reduce their risk of heart disease.

Martinez notes several ways to reduce your risk:

- Stop all tobacco use, including cigarettes and vaping.
- Reduce salt in the diet, which can decrease blood pressure.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables, which can be fresh, frozen or canned.
- Exercise regularly.

“Our risk for heart disease can increase as we age,” Martinez said. “Living an unhealthy lifestyle – no matter your age – can increase your risk for heart disease. We want to make sure we are establishing healthy behaviors when we are young and continue to follow that pattern throughout our lives.”

She said those that may be at high risk for heart disease early in their lives can reverse that pattern by adopting healthy habits. The sooner they start, the better.

“A person who is generally healthy should still see their primary care physician, nurse practitioners, physician’s assistant or whoever your medical professional is, at least once per year,” Martinez said, noting that lab tests are a good way to understand changes or trends in health.

Doctors and registered dieticians can help with simple diet changes. Exercise can help to maintain a healthy weight for your body type, as well as maintain muscle. Health professionals can also help patients manage stress and maintain mental health.

Martinez noted that faculty in K-State’s College of Human Health and Sciences recently validated updated guidelines for the American Heart Association’s PREVENT calculator, which helps to evaluate cardiovascular disease risk. The equations take into account many factors, including age, cholesterol levels, blood pressure and more to calculate 10- and 20-year risks of disease.

The calculator is [available online from the American Heart Association](#).

More information on healthy living also is available at [local extension offices in Kansas](#).

Martinez recently spoke on steps to reduce heart disease during the Feb. 14 episode of Sound Living, a weekly podcast from K-State Research and Extension. [The recorded program is available online](#).

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
PREVENT Online Calculator (American Heart Association),
<https://professional.heart.org/en/guidelines-and-statements/prevent-calculator>

K-State Research and Extension statewide offices, <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations>

Sound Living (K-State Research and Extension), <https://soundlivingksu.libsyn.com>

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