

World Heart Day: Use heart for action, a mindful approach to staying heart healthy

The biggest hurdle to healthy lifestyle in the current day and age across all age groups of people is addiction to gadgets

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The doctors and nursing students, staffs participate in World Heart day awareness campaign in Thoothukudi Government Medical College hospital on September 28, 2024. | Photo Credit: N. Rajesh

This year's World Heart Day theme "Use heart for action" is a call to action at every level from individuals to families and communities to think proactively and modify day-to-day lifestyle choices to curb the burgeoning global heart disease epidemic.

As a preventive cardiologist working with cardiac patients and at-risk individuals in India for the past decade, the main message I would like to emphasise on this day is "Start early and do it consistently". This is the only way to stay away from

cardiovascular diseases, such as heart attack, stroke, heart failure and arrhythmias, which today are the leading causes of death and disability worldwide.

Hurdles to healthy lifestyle

While people are better aware about the importance of exercise and diet in protecting their heart health, it is true that they are struggling to incorporate effective lifestyle changes on a regular basis. When work gets demanding, when household chores are spiralling, when a new role is overpowering or when a loved one needs constant care, all attempts to stay physically fit and eat healthy fall apart.

The biggest hurdle to healthy lifestyle in the current day and age across all age groups of people is addiction to gadgets. It is definitely an addiction in the true sense. You might just open your gadget for a short break from work or studies and before you realise it, you would have spent hours on social media or binge watched all episodes of your favourite show. We have learnt to associate tobacco, alcohol and recreational drugs to addictive behaviours but fail to recognise the addictive power of gadgets.

Lifestyle versus genes

A lifestyle built with healthy blocks like regular exercise, balanced diet, healthy body weight, emotional wellbeing, adequate sleep, mindfulness and quality time for loved ones has been proven to be the best defence against almost all the diseases that are rampant today. Diabetes, hypertension, cholesterol abnormalities, cardiovascular disease, liver dysfunction, kidney ailments, chronic lung diseases, joint disorders, musculoskeletal conditions, fertility problems and some cancers and psychosocial illnesses are all caused by unhealthy lifestyle.

We now know that even individuals with a strong genetic predisposition to these diseases can prevent the “illness trap” by choosing the healthy building blocks and getting regular medical checks as these are “epigenes” and will manifest only if the lifestyle and environment are conducive.

How early should we start

The current international guidelines recommend getting the first cardiovascular health check at the age of 20 years. With a medical assessment that includes body mass index, blood pressure, blood cholesterol, blood sugar, electrocardiogram (ECG), a detailed health history and health-related lifestyle evaluation, we are able to provide

the individual with a risk profile along with an action plan to reduce cardiovascular risk through lifestyle changes, medications or both.

To be healthy at the age of 20, the role of a healthy infancy, childhood and adolescence cannot be overemphasised. And health at 20 has a direct correlation with the health of that individual at the age of 60! Hence, starting early and staying consistent with our healthy behaviours is the need of the hour.

Simple and practical tips

Here are some ways you can conquer healthy lifestyle habits, from the perspective of a cardiac wellness physician who has guided people from all walks of life in getting healthier, heart-fit and youthful.

Start with baby steps: make one small change per week, like add a fruit to your daily diet or walk for 15 minutes either inside your house or in the terrace or in your office, and do it as many days as you can in that week. The next week, appreciate yourself for being consistent the previous week and try to add some nuts and seeds instead of namkeen or increase the exercise time by a few minutes. Set small but smart goals and achieve them to see the impact on your overall health!

Have a plan for the bad days: we all know that life will throw surprises at us. When these surprises come as we are establishing a healthy routine, we tend to crumble and return to the unhealthy behaviours. For example, people who are trying to quit smoking very often fail when their peer pressure is too much or their withdrawal symptoms are difficult to manage.

Getting the help of a healthcare provider with expertise in helping people quit is critical in this case. There are medically proven ways to help people quit tobacco and to stay quit, getting the right guidance from the right provider is key.

Work as a team: we often underestimate the power of teamwork when it comes to behaviour modification. For a child, the team includes the parents, the home, the school, the teachers and the peers. Positive reinforcement of physical activity, healthy eating habits at home, creating a consistent sleep pattern, refraining from over usage of gadgets, and providing opportunities for children to explore outdoor activities are some ways to build healthy youngsters at home, while educating students about healthy lifestyles, promoting food choices with nutritional benefits in school

cafeterias, encouraging physical activity during leisure time and physical education classes covering team activities and emotional bonding are crucial the school can take to inculcate life long healthy habits.

For a young adult, healthy work environment and emotional support systems are mandatory additions to the team that they have built as children.

And for each of us making changes to our lifestyle as adults, it is not easy when done alone. Form a team with your friends, co-workers, spouse, children or neighbours and start motivating one another, share tips and tricks on how you overcame a barrier and give the extra push that someone may need when caught up with a crisis.

And remember, your physician is part of this core team! Get the guidance of your physician before embarking on any new fitness routine or dietary change especially if you have pre-existing medical conditions. Keep them aware of your health plan and goals and stay on a regular follow-up. This World Heart Day should be the wake up call for all to move more, eat healthy, sleep well, feel fresh and be energised to take care of our hearts and our overall wellbeing.

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