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February is American Heart Month

February is Valentine's Day, and we generally think about our sweethearts. However, February is also American Heart Month, which encourages us to be aware of the importance of heart health and what we can do to help prevent cardiovascular disease. The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute sponsors this month, which seeks to highlight the dangerous impact of heart disease in the United States.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Heart disease is the leading cause of death for men and women in most racial and ethnic groups. One in five deaths are attributed to heart disease. While these figures are stark, there are steps you can take to prevent heart disease. Knowing your risk factors is important.

- **Smoking:** Smoking is a considerable risk factor for heart disease. If you don't smoke, don't start, and if you do, you need to stop. Smoking contributes to one in four heart-related deaths. Exposure to secondhand smoke is also a risk factor. Quitting smoking can reduce your risk of developing heart disease.
- **High blood pressure:** High blood pressure is called hypertension. High blood pressure means that the blood that passes through your arteries puts too much pressure on the walls of your blood vessels. The higher the blood pressure means you are at more risk for heart disease, heart attack, or stroke. Monitor your blood pressure regularly. Your healthcare provider will advise you if they believe your BP is too high.
- **High Cholesterol:** Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance made by your liver. We need some cholesterol to make hormones and digest fatty foods. However, often our cholesterol levels are too high. Having high blood cholesterol can lead to a buildup called "plaque" on the walls of your arteries, which can lead to a heart attack or stroke. Many factors affect your total cholesterol; healthcare professionals recommend a total cholesterol number lower than 200 mg/dL. High cholesterol has no signs or symptoms; you will need a blood test to determine if you have high cholesterol.

However, you can make changes in your everyday life to prevent heart disease. Heart disease doesn't have to be unavoidable. In addition to the above considerations, the following recommendations are also recommended.

- **Get Active:** People should try to get at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise in a week or 30 minutes of exercise five days per week. Don't stress if you can't do it all at once; ten-minute intervals will also work. Start slowly and check with your healthcare provider before you start an exercise program.
- **Eat a heart-healthy diet:** Your diet should include plenty of non-starchy vegetables (broccoli, leafy greens, peppers, cauliflower, etc.), beans and legumes, lean meat and fish, low-fat dairy, whole grains, and healthy fats such as olive oil.
- **Maintain a healthy weight:** Being overweight can raise your risk of heart disease. This is especially so if you carry your weight around your middle. Check with your healthcare provider about your ideal weight.
- **See your healthcare provider regularly.** They can recommend preventative tests and actions you can take to prevent heart disease.

For more information about American Heart Month, visit the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>.