SEVEN HEART-HEALTHY NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS
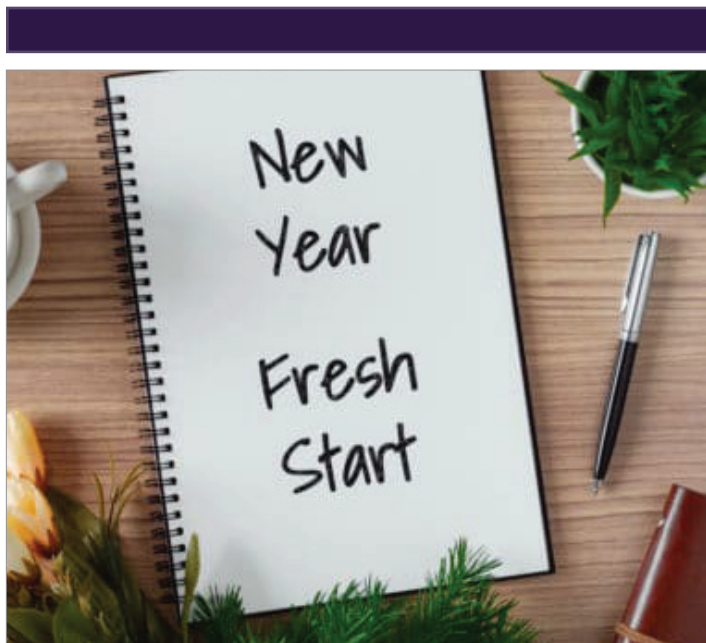
A long, challenging 2021 is finally behind us, and it's time to look forward to (hopefully) better days in 2022. January is always a time for reflection on the previous year, and it provides a great opportunity to set some goals for the upcoming year. When creating New Year's resolutions, it's always a good idea to choose at least one that focuses on your health. One of the best ways to take control of your general health is to focus on improving the health of your heart. **According to the American Heart Association**, heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States, claiming the lives of approximately 650,000 men and women each year. Focusing on heart-healthy goals is one of the best ways to improve your long-term health.

While setting lofty goals for the upcoming year is admirable, it might not be your best approach. A study conducted by Strava analyzed data from more than 800 million user-logged activities and found that most people abandon their New Year's resolution by January 19th. Additional studies have found that roughly **80% of people have given up on their New Year's resolutions by the second week in February**. In order to avoid becoming one of these statistics,

it's best to think small when constructing your heart-healthy New Year's resolution.

The following tips will help increase the likelihood that you'll see your heart-healthy New Year's resolution through to completion:

- **Create realistic goals** – You're much more likely to achieve your final objective when you set goals you know you can keep
- **Keep it simple** – If you're a beginner runner, it's unlikely that you'll be able to start out doing 10 miles a day. Instead, start with a small 15-20 minute workout that alternates intervals of running and walking. Over time, you'll be able to build up to that 10-mile goal
- **Stay persistent** – Making a lifestyle change is challenging. There may be times when you'll slip up. This is normal. The key is to stick with it and put in the effort to get back on track as soon as possible

With these tips in mind, let's review seven heart-healthy New Year's resolutions that will help you take control of your health in 2022.

1. Lose Weight

If you struggle to maintain a healthy weight, you're not alone. Approximately *36.5% of Americans are obese, while an additional 32.5% are overweight*. In total, more than two-thirds of adults in the United States could benefit from losing weight.

You'll reap tremendous benefits when you're able to maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight increases your risk of a variety of serious health issues, including:

- Heart disease
- Stroke
- High cholesterol levels
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Blood clots

Even a small reduction in weight can have a significant impact on your health. Losing 7-10 pounds can reduce your risk of type 2 diabetes (a major risk factor for heart disease) by as much as 70%.

While it's common to adopt a fad diet to shed your extra pounds, this isn't necessarily the best approach to yield sustainable, long-term results. Instead, it's best to focus on lifestyle modification that includes healthy eating and regular exercise. When you adopt this approach, it'll be much easier to lose excess weight, and you're more likely to keep the pounds off over time.

A good way to take control of your weight is to track your food intake and exercise. You can do this in several ways:

- Keep a daily food diary tracking your caloric intake, the types of food you're eating, and how much exercise you got that day
- Download an app that will track your food intake and exercise for you
- Record a list of triggers that cause you to eat more so you can take steps to avoid them

2. Improve Your Fitness Regiment

Over *80% of adults fail to meet the guidelines for muscle-strengthening and aerobic activities*. This is one of the easiest steps you can take to improve your heart health. Increasing the amount of exercise you get will pay huge dividends, improving your overall level of fitness and helping you maintain a healthier weight.

As with most health-oriented New Year's resolutions, it's best to start small with this goal. Commit to getting around 30-45 minutes of exercise at least four days a week for a month. This is a reasonable goal that you are more likely to keep than a lofty plan that involves an hour of exercise a day.

It's important to figure out ways to make working out more appealing. This will improve your motivation and increase the likelihood that you'll stick with your new

fitness regimen. The following tips will help you establish the right exercise regimen for you:

- **Identify activities you enjoy** – If you hate running, don't choose this activity since you're not likely to stick with it
- **Find an exercise buddy** – Working out with a friend can make exercise a more social activity, and you can help motivate each other
- **Join an exercise class** – Many people find it's easier to incorporate fitness into their lives when they start with classes run by an experienced trainer
- **Utilize technology** – Many fitness apps can help track your progress, providing additional motivation to stick with your exercise program

3. Reduce Stress

Stress can have a debilitating impact on your body and can be devastating for your heart health. Highly stressed individuals tend to have an increased risk of heart attack and stroke. For this reason, you must take steps to relax more. Some ways to reduce stress include:

- Meditating
- Yoga
- Deep breathing exercises
- Exercise
- Reading a book
- Getting outside for a walk every day

4. Get More Sleep

Failing to get enough sleep can have a serious impact on your heart health:

- Increases your risk of heart failure and atrial fibrillation
- Leads to high blood pressure
- Causes overeating
- Causes inflammation

These tips will help ensure you get the proper amount of sleep and are more able to have a restful sleep each night:

- Establish a routine where you go to bed at the same time every night
- Avoid looking at your phone shortly before going to bed
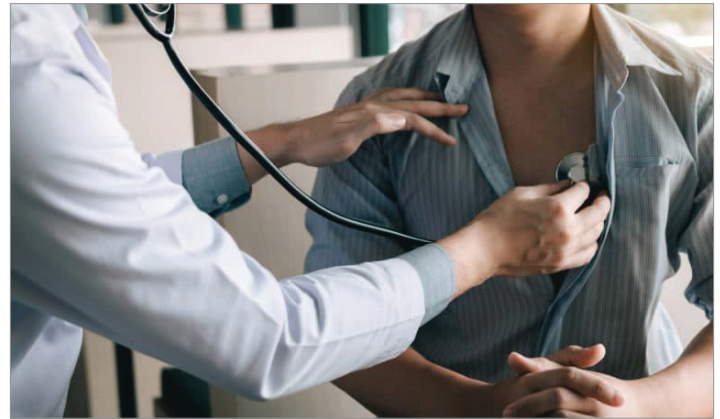
(the blue light from your screen can make it harder to fall asleep)

- Cut back on caffeine, and don't consume it in the evening
- Reduce alcohol intake
- Sleep in a cool, dark room

5. Get an Annual Physical

If you don't go for an annual physical, you should start making it a part of your health routine. These checkups are covered by insurance, so it won't cost you anything to learn important insights into your health state.

During your physical, your doctor can:

- Ensure you don't have any major health issues
- Identify any potential problems in their earliest stages
- Monitor important health markers such as your glucose levels and blood pressure
- Discuss lifestyle activities that can help improve your health in the coming year

Going for a physical is an important step that can help you begin focusing on heart-health risk modification. This can help prevent problems from arising down the road.

6. Reduce Your Sugar Intake

A Harvard study found that *consuming 1-2 sweetened with sugar drinks a day increases your risk of a heart attack or fatal heart disease by 35%*. Cutting these drinks out of your life entirely will go a long way to improving your heart health.

Also, it's a good idea to cut sugary snacks out of your diet or, at the very least, reduce your consumption of them significantly. Instead of reaching for cookies, chocolate, or other sugary desserts, consider substituting fresh fruit as a healthier way to satisfy your sweet craving.

7. Focus on Oral Health

There is a strong link between your oral health and your heart health. Gum disease can significantly increase your risk of cardiovascular disease. Make sure you brush twice a day, floss once a day, and visit your dentist twice a year for regular cleanings.