

HEART HEALTH

MAKING EVERY EFFORT COUNT

By Martha Funnell, MS, RN, CDE

If you want to do all you can to keep your blood pressure and cholesterol numbers in your target range, where do you start and what can you do?

There are many things you can do to help manage your blood pressure and cholesterol at the same time. Knowing what will give you the most benefit can help you decide where to put your efforts.

* BE MORE ACTIVE

Being active has many benefits. Exercise can lower your blood pressure while boosting your HDL (good) cholesterol level. Walking, biking or doing other physical activity for about 30 minutes each day can make a big difference in your heart health. But the benefits of exercise don't stop there: Being active makes it easier to manage your weight, gives you more energy, helps you cope with stress and helps you sleep better. Exercise can even help to prevent

depression and lower your risk for Alzheimer's disease. People who are physically active on a regular basis can sometimes even reduce the amount of medicine they take. As the saying goes: Exercise is the best medicine.

* AIM FOR A HEALTHY WEIGHT

If you have diabetes, you may already know losing weight helps to manage blood glucose by lowering insulin resistance. In other words, when you lose weight, your body can use insulin more easily, which in turn means better glucose readings. But you may not know losing weight is one of the most effective things you can do to lower your blood pressure. It can also help decrease the burden on your heart and your joints. You don't have to lose a lot of weight to reap health benefits: Losing just 7 percent to

10 percent of your body weight can lead to improved glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

* EAT LESS SATURATED FAT

Saturated fat is solid, or hard, at room temperature and is found in foods such as bacon and shortening. Both saturated fat and trans fat, a type of fat found in some processed foods, can raise your LDL (bad) cholesterol level. Eating less of these types of fats and switching to more heart-healthy fats, such as olive and canola oils, can lower your LDL level. Fat is also very dense in calories. In fact, there are twice as many calories in a gram of fat as there are in a gram of carbohydrate or protein. Eating less fat is an effective way to cut calories and lose weight, which can help lower your blood pressure, too.

* EAT MORE FIBER

Eating more fiber can help to lower your cholesterol level and blood glucose. Fiber is found in vegetables, fruits, beans and whole-grain breads and cereals. Foods that are high in fiber also help you feel full more quickly, which can help in your weight-loss efforts.

* LEARN ALL YOU CAN ABOUT HEART DISEASE

Learning about your condition will help you feel less stressed and more in control. But learning goes beyond reading about heart disease. Learn how it affects you personally, such as what you can do to improve your future health and when to call your health care team. If your health care provider does not have time to explain it fully, ask if you can set a special time to talk about it. Or, ask if there is someone else with whom you could meet or a health education program you can attend. Your pharmacist is also a good source of information about your medicines and how they work.

