

February is Heart Health Month by Mike DeCinti

Basil is the best herb to use when cooking lamb, you should never mix alcohol and a trip to the sauna, and cantaloupes are low in sodium but high in potassium. These are just a few things I learned while visiting the American Heart Association's website americanheart.org.

The other thing I learned is that February is American Heart Month and you'll find some shocking information online. More than 70 million Americans live with some form of heart disease, and this disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States. During February the American Heart Association reinforces their commitment to fighting heart disease by promoting awareness about its risks, its causes, and the ways to reduce the chance of developing this deadly illness.

Many of the factors that lead to heart disease, such as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, and obesity, can be controlled with commonsense steps and healthy lifestyles. The organization encourages Americans to work toward four simple goals that can lead to a healthy heart: exercise daily; develop good eating habits; avoid tobacco, drugs, and excessive alcohol; and take advantage of preventive screenings to detect problems early.

According to recent estimates, nearly one in three U.S. adults has high blood pressure, but because there are no symptoms, one-third of these people don't know they have it. In fact, many people have high blood pressure for years without knowing it. Uncontrolled high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart attack, heart failure or kidney failure. This is why high blood pressure is often called the "silent killer." The only way to tell if you have high blood pressure is to have your blood pressure checked.

But what is so discouraging is the fact that although we all have the power to protect ourselves by striving toward these goals, most Americans ignore that fact and suffer needlessly. Making healthy choices is simple in theory, but it takes a disciplined person to stick with it. Sadly, most people can do it, but choose not to until it's too late.

Throughout the last seven months I have written articles that focused on ways to accomplish those four goals. They were easy steps to take to help you start living a healthier lifestyle. Well there's one more thing that can help in this process and I strongly believe this is something everyone can do. Sleep.

Sleeping more than five hours each night significantly lowers the risk of developing high blood pressure in adults. High blood pressure is becoming an increasingly common problem, even though people are more knowledgeable about it and how it can be treated.

When people with high and normal blood pressure are studied, they have increased blood pressure when their sleep is cut short. Other studies show that women who get too little sleep are more likely to have a heart attack. Understanding the relationship between sleep

and blood pressure could point the way to lower the risk of developing high blood pressure.

Blood pressure and heart rate vary during the day and are lowest during sleep. In fact, blood pressure remains low while a person sleeps and immediately increases when a person awakens. Obviously, in people who sleep less, the average blood pressure would be higher because they would have shorter periods of low blood pressure.

A recent survey found that the risk of high blood pressure was nearly double for people between the ages of 32 and 59 who slept five hours or less each night. Short sleep duration could also influence hypertension, by making it more difficult to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Not getting enough sleep was associated with irritability, impatience, and feeling tired and stressed, feelings and emotional states that would reduce your willpower to follow diet or exercise plans.

The bottom line, getting enough sleep is important to your health, and might be helpful in warding off high blood pressure, which can lead to a number of other problems, including heart and kidney disease and stroke. So end your day with a good night's sleep. When you wake up feeling refreshed, you can start working on that diet and exercise plan.

And as always, I encourage you to visit these websites or consult your physician for more help on these and other health-related subjects.