

Love Your Heart

It's the month of Love!

We often associate February with hearts. We express our love for someone with a heart-shaped card or candy box, we sign our name with a heart, or add heart icons to our phone texts.

Please join me this month to focus on loving our *own* hearts. This February, during American Heart Month, we would like to pass along some tips for taking care of our hearts.

And, why should we take care of our hearts? One answer is because cardiovascular diseases are affecting so many of us. There are costs to lives and families, costs in health care dollars, and costs to emergency response and health care resources. In fact, about 12% of all U.S. health expenditures (about \$378.0 billion in 2017-2018) are due to cardiovascular diseases.

What are cardiovascular diseases? These are conditions resulting from a substance called plaque building up in our arteries – these conditions include coronary artery disease, chest pain, heart attacks and strokes. Strokes may lead to disabilities such as paralysis and speech difficulties; while heart failure may result in fatigue and difficulty with physical activities. Both heart disease and stroke are leading causes of death in the United States. In 2020, heart disease was the #1 cause of death and stroke was the 5th leading cause of death in the United States. About 1 in 12 adult Nebraskans have been diagnosed with a cardiovascular disease.

Are you at risk? Ask yourself if any of these risk factors apply to you: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, physical inactivity, unhealthy diet, diabetes, smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, high levels of stress and family history of heart disease or stroke. If the answer is yes, consider making a change starting this month.

What are some changes you can make? Let's just look at one important risk factor: high blood pressure. Here are three steps you could take this month:

- (1) Measure Your Blood Pressure:** Nearly 1 in every 3 South Heartland adults has been diagnosed with high blood pressure (hypertension). The higher your blood pressure levels, the more risk you have for other health problems, such as heart disease, heart attack and stroke. High blood pressure usually has no warning signs or symptoms, so measuring your blood pressure is the only way to know whether you have high blood pressure, which is called the "silent killer" because so many people do not know they have it.
- (2) Know Your Risk for High Blood Pressure:** Your age and family history can increase your risk for high blood pressure and some medical conditions, like diabetes, can raise your risk for high blood pressure.
- (3) Manage Your Blood Pressure:** Medications may be needed to manage your blood pressure, but many people are able to lower their blood pressure to a healthy range with lifestyle changes:

- Getting at least 150 minutes of physical activity each week (about 30 minutes each day for 5 days each week)
- Not smoking
- Eating a healthy diet, including limiting sodium (salt) and alcohol
- Keeping a healthy weight
- Managing stress

Along with knowing your risk factors for heart disease, it is extremely important to know if you are experiencing a heart attack. The major Signs and Symptoms of Heart Attack are:

- **Chest pain or discomfort.** Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center or left side of the chest that lasts for more than a few minutes or that goes away and comes back. The discomfort can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain.
- **Feeling weak, light-headed, or faint.** You may also break out into a cold sweat.
- **Pain or discomfort in the jaw, neck, or back.**
- **Pain or discomfort in one or both arms or shoulders.**
- **Shortness of breath.** This often comes along with chest discomfort, but shortness of breath also can happen before chest discomfort.

Other symptoms of a heart attack could include unusual or unexplained tiredness and nausea or vomiting. Not all of these warning signs occur in every heart attack, but knowing them could save your life or the life of someone else. Every minute counts, even if the symptoms seem to disappear, so if you experience any of the symptoms, call 9-1-1 immediately! The chances of surviving a heart attack are better the sooner emergency treatment begins and the life you save could be your own.

This February, South Heartland challenges you to love your own heart! Keep it healthy for those who love you by taking one step to reduce your risk for cardiovascular disease.

Here are some healthy heart resources to help you take that first step. To find locations to get your blood pressure measured in South Heartland health district, contact the health department or visit our website: southheartlandhealth.ne.gov. For more information about high blood pressure and what you can do about it, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/bloodpressure/>. For more information on heart attack symptoms, risk and recovery visit: https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/heart_attack.htm. For more information about cardiovascular disease in Nebraska visit: <https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/CVD/state/NE>.

Michele Bever is the Executive Director for South Heartland District Health Department, serving Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster Counties. She may be reached at 402-462-6211 or toll free at 877-238-7595.