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Heart Healthy Living Every Day (not just during heart month)

Sharon, CT — The idea of working to make your heart stronger and doing what it takes to prevent—or at least delay—heart disease may sound like about as much fun as flossing your teeth.

But it doesn't have to be that way, if you use the "Take 10" approach. That means doing simple things for yourself and your heart health as often as possible, like taking the tips below. It's true that there are some risk factors for heart disease you can't change, like your family history, but there are little things you can do as go about your day that can make a difference.

Here are three big tips and some smaller ones for a heart-healthy life:

1. Get moving. There's nothing better for you and your heart's health than being physically active. No pill or diet can really substitute for the benefits of exercise. Fitting in at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity a day can help you not only make your heart stronger, but also lower your risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. Can't find the time? Take 10.

Here are some quick tips for adding more physical activity to your life. Remember though before starting any exercise program, you'll want to check with your health care professional first.

- Get off the bus one stop earlier.
- Walk to the store.
- Stand up and move around while making phone calls.
- Cut back on e-mail. Deliver the message in person.
- Do your own yard work.
- Walk up the stairs instead of taking the elevator.
- Park as far away from the store as you can.
- Take a walk around the building on your break at work.
- Walk the dog. Walk with your children.
- Refuse to use the drive-up window.
- After lunch, walk around the building or around the block.
- Don't stay seated for more than 30 minutes.
- Gather some like-minded friends and start a walking club

2. Be smart about fat. Eating right is a big part of living a heart healthy lifestyle. Being smart about the type of fats in the food you eat is a great place to start.

Just as there are good and bad types of cholesterol, there are good and bad varieties of fat. The "good" fats in terms of heart health are fats found in foods like fish, olive oil, walnuts and avocados. The "bad" fats, the fats that can really clog your arteries, come in two varieties: saturated fats—typically found in whole milk dairy products like butter and ice cream and red meat—and trans fats. Trans fats are typically found in commercial baked goods or fried foods, as well as whole milk—and can be just as bad, maybe even worse for you than saturated fats.

The 2010 federal dietary guidelines challenge Americans to limit saturated fat to less than 10 percent of their daily calories and to keep trans fat consumption as low as possible.

Here are some quick tips for eating a heart-healthy diet:

- Replace refined grains with whole grains (think whole wheat bread products, brown rice and quinoa).
- Instead of using butter when cooking, opt for olive oil.
- Switch to low-fat (1 percent) or fat-free dairy products.
- Limit meat intake, and when you have it, choose lean cuts and remove fat and skin (from chicken) before cooking.
- Broil, bake, roast or poach foods rather than fry them.
- Instead of whole milk or cream, drink skim or one percent milk. Try nonfat or low-fat yogurt in place of sour cream. Use nonfat or low-fat cheeses.
- Cut out (or limit) sausage, bacon and processed high-fat cold cuts and organ meats such as liver, kidney or brains.

- Eat egg yolks only in moderation. Egg whites contain no fat or cholesterol and can be eaten often. In most recipes, substitute two egg whites for one whole egg.
- If you really want to be good, do what the federal government is now recommending and increase your daily consumption of fruits and vegetables to four and a half cups. Not ready for that yet? Try going from three to five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

3. Teach your mind to unwind. Learning to cope with stress and relax, even just a little, is a challenge for most of us. Some common ways of coping with stress, such as overeating, heavy drinking and smoking, are clearly bad for your heart.

Here are a few stress busting ideas:

- Consider taking a yoga class. If you don't have time for that, practice deep breathing and relaxation exercises while you sit in traffic.
- Schedule your time more effectively using a calendar and to-do lists, prioritizing activities and realizing you can't do everything.
- Learn how to say no to requests that add extra burdens and can wreak havoc on your day.
- Insist on help with regular chores.
- Rehearse for stressful events. Imagine yourself feeling calm and confident in an anticipated stressful situation. You will be able to relax more easily when the situation arises.
- Let yourself laugh and cry. Laughter makes your muscles go limp and releases tension, so try to keep a sense of humor. Tears can help cleanse the body of substances that accumulate under stress.
- Talk out troubles. It sometimes helps to talk with a friend, relative or member of the clergy. Another person can help you see a problem from a different point of view.
- Help others. Because we concentrate on ourselves when we're distressed, sometimes helping others is the perfect remedy for whatever is troubling us.
- Learn acceptance when a difficult problem is out of your control, which is better than worrying and getting nowhere.
- And last but not least, try to develop and maintain a positive attitude. Difficult as it may seem at times, viewing changes as positive challenges, opportunities or blessings, if nothing else, could help your heart health.

For more information on the health topics mentioned in this article visit the HealthyWomen.org areas below.

Heart Health Center: www.healthywomen.org/healthcenter/heart-health

Healthy Living: www.healthywomen.org/ages-and-stages/healthy-living

Midlife & Beyond: www.healthywomen.org/ages-and-stages/midlife-and-beyond

Diet and Fitness Center: www.healthywomen.org/healthcenter/diet-and-fitness

Heart Disease: www.healthywomen.org/condition/heart-disease

High Blood Pressure: www.healthywomen.org/condition/high-blood-pressure

Cholesterol: www.healthywomen.org/condition/cholesterol