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February is American Heart Health Month

Love is in the air this week and there is no better time to show a little love for yourself than by taking care of your own heart! According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women, but heart disease is preventable and controllable. We can start by taking small steps every day to bring our loved ones and ourselves closer to heart health.

As you begin your journey to better heart health, keep these things in mind:

- Don't become overwhelmed. Every step brings you closer to a healthier heart.
- Don't go it alone. The journey is more fun when you have company. Ask friends and family to join you.
- Don't get discouraged. You may not be able to take all of the steps at one time. Get a good night's sleep and do what you can do again tomorrow.
- Reward yourself. Find fun things to do to decrease your stress. Round up some colleagues for a lunchtime walk, join a singing group, or have a healthy dinner with family or friends.

Some health conditions and lifestyle factors can put people at a higher risk for developing heart disease. You can help prevent heart disease by making healthy choices and managing any medical conditions you may have.

Choosing healthful meal and snack options can help you avoid heart disease and its complications. Be sure to eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables – adults need at least 5 servings a day. Eating foods low in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol and high in fiber can help prevent high cholesterol. Limiting salt in your diet can lower blood pressure.

Being overweight or obese can increase your risk for heart disease. Physical activity can help you maintain a healthy weight and helps to lower cholesterol and blood pressure. Adults should engage in moderate-intensity exercise for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week. Always check with your healthcare provider before beginning an exercise program.

High blood pressure often has no symptoms, so be sure to have it checked regularly. You can do this at home, at many pharmacies, or at your doctor's office.

Cigarette smoking greatly increases your risk for heart disease. If you don't smoke, don't start. If you do smoke, quit as soon as possible. Your doctor can suggest ways to help you quit.

Avoid drinking too much alcohol, which can increase your blood pressure. Men should stick to no more than two drinks per day, and women to no more than one.

Your healthcare provider should test your cholesterol levels at least once every 5 years.

If you have diabetes, monitor your blood sugar levels closely, and follow your doctor's treatment recommendations.

Lastly, if you're taking medication to treat high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes, follow your doctor's instructions carefully. Always ask questions if you don't understand something.

These are simple steps to take every day for better heart health. Working one step at a time, heart disease can be prevented or controlled. For more information, contact Kathy in the Southwind Extension District office at 620-365-2242 or kmcewan@ksu.edu.