

Heart disease is New York's number one killer, accounting for nearly one in three of all deaths in the state. During Healthy Heart Month in February the Broome County Health Department reminds you that taking steps for a healthier heart can reduce the tragically high toll of heart disease.

The risk of heart disease is higher for those with a family history of the disease and increases as people age. However, everyone – men and women, young and old – have an increased risk of heart disease due to physical inactivity, smoking, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and being overweight. It's important for women to remember that heart disease is not just a 'man's disease. Heart disease takes the lives of more women than breast cancer,

You can greatly reduce the risk and severity of heart disease by making such simple lifestyle choices as engaging in physical activity, eating foods low in fat, avoiding tobacco and getting regular check-ups.

Physical activity is an easy and enjoyable way to reduce your risk of heart disease. Physical activity helps strengthen your heart, control weight, lower high blood pressure and reduce cholesterol, which can block arteries and control weight. At the same time, physical activity provides many other benefits, including reducing the risk of cancer and stress reduction.

The New York State Department of Health recommends at least 30 minutes of physical activity, such as brisk walking, on most days of the week. You can fit physical activity into a busy schedule by breaking it up into smaller portions. At work, a lunchtime walk will improve your health and help you feel more refreshed in the afternoon.

You can also reduce your risk of heart disease by following the recommendations of the State Health Department to eat five or more servings of vegetables and fruits every day. Choosing vegetables and fruits helps reduce cholesterol, control weight and reduce the risk of several types of cancer.

When packing a lunch, grab a box of raisins, a banana, a handful of grapes, cherry tomatoes or carrot sticks. At any time, a piece of fruit or crispy vegetable makes a healthier snack than chips or candy, which contain saturated fat. Drink one percent or fat-free milk, rather than whole milk, and 100 percent fruit juice, water or unsweetened ice tea, rather than soft drinks.

Smokers are twice as likely to have a heart attack as nonsmokers. On the first day you stop smoking you begin to reduce your risk of heart disease, as carbon monoxide is removed from your blood and the oxygen level increases. Within one year, your risk of heart attack is cut in half.

For information on how to quite smoking call Nurse Direct at United Health Services at 763-5555 or toll free at 1-800-295-8088 or call the New York State Health Department toll-free Smokers' Quit-line at 1-866NYQUITS(697-8487). You can also log onto the Broome/Tioga P.R.E.V.E.N.T. coalition's web page at www.gobroomecounty.com. Go to Health & Safety, scroll down and click on the Stop Don't Start icon.

High blood pressure increases the heart's workload, causing it to enlarge and weaken. Talk to your health care provider about the need for a blood pressure test. If you have high blood pressure, follow your health care provider's advice to control it.

To learn more about how to protect yourself from heart disease, call the American Heart Association toll free at 1-800-242-8721.