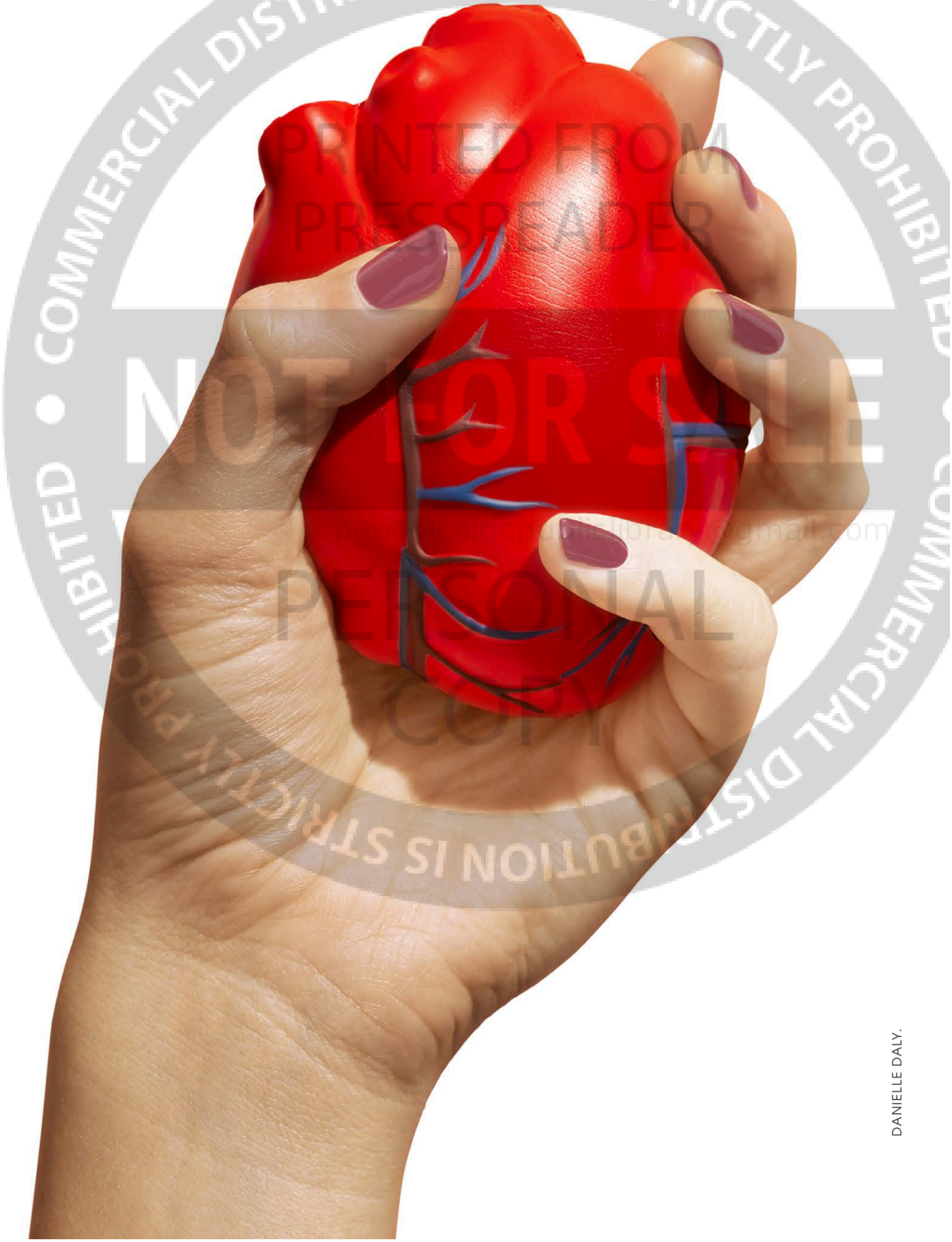
- Heart / Lifestyles

HEALTH



DANIELLE DALY.

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Your HEART IS IN Your HANDS

Why wait for a sign that something isn't right with this **MOST IMPORTANT ORGAN** before getting smart about your heart? Here, five things you can do to be proactive about your cardiovascular health and **LIVE A LONG, HEALTHY, AND ENERGETIC LIFE.**

BY BETH HOWARD

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If you've heard that heart disease is the leading cause of death for women, you're ahead of the game—fewer women today know that than did a decade ago, data shows. Unfortunately, that knowledge gap prevents many women from taking the steps they need to live their best lives, says Sharonne N. Hayes, M.D., a cardiologist and the founder of the Women's Heart Clinic at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. "They may live with chronic chest pain or heart failure, or need lots of procedures and medications because of heart damage," she says. And of course there's the risk of death from a heart attack or a stroke.

But here's the empowering part: There's a lot you can do to keep your heart strong for the rest of your life. First, if you smoke, do everything you can to quit—it's the most powerful way to prevent heart disease, says Dr. Hayes. Second, shift your eating to include more fruits, veggies, and lean protein and far less saturated fat and processed foods (check out the Mediterranean diet or the DASH diet). Third, talk to your doctor about whether your weight puts you at risk, as carrying too much extra weight may increase your risk of heart problems. Beyond those basics, here are ways to get on top of your heart health today.

Know your numbers

Four measurements are especially critical to cardiovascular health. Understanding why they are important is just as significant as knowing the healthy range for each one. That's because you can improve each factor by making lifestyle changes and possibly taking meds.

CHOLESTEROL:

When you have too much of the "bad" type of cholesterol (LDL), fatty deposits can collect in your blood vessels, eventually making it tough for blood to flow; the deposits can also break off and cause a stroke or a heart attack.

Ideal range for healthy people without atherosclerosis: **Total cholesterol**: under 200; **LDL**: under 100; **HDL**: 60 or higher; **triglycerides**: under 150

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LIPOPROTEIN(A):

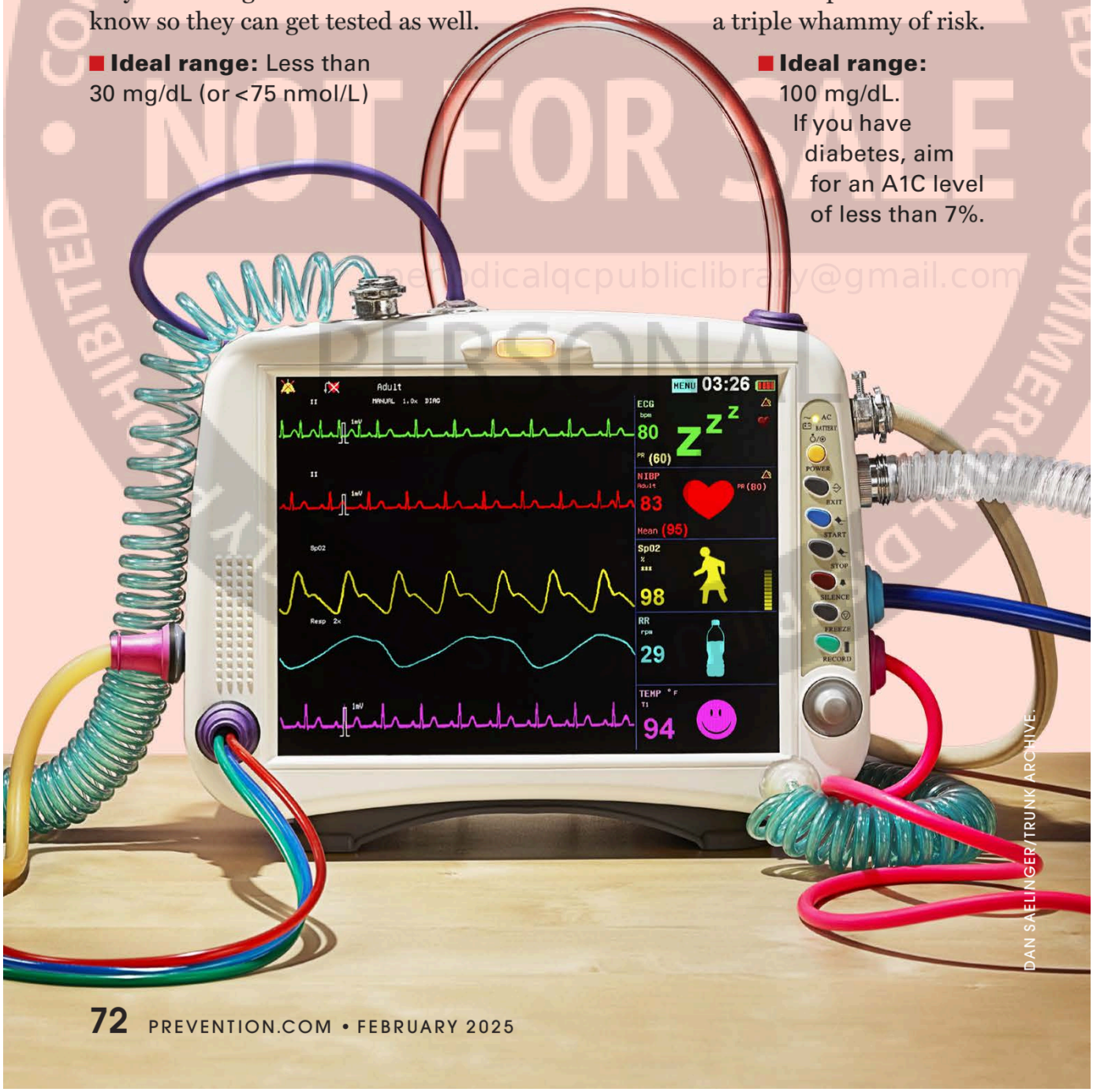
High lipoprotein(a), or Lp(a), in your blood is an independent risk factor for heart disease that runs in families. "You ought to have at least one Lp(a) assessment as an adult," Dr. Hayes says. If your levels are off, she adds, let your siblings and adult children know so they can get tested as well.

■ **Ideal range:** Less than 30 mg/dL (or <75 nmol/L)

FASTING BLOOD SUGAR:

Having high blood sugar levels (such as with diabetes) can eventually damage the blood vessels in your heart, which raises your risk of cardiovascular disease. It also ups the chance that you'll develop problems with both cholesterol and blood pressure—a triple whammy of risk.

■ **Ideal range:** 100 mg/dL. If you have diabetes, aim for an A1C level of less than 7%.



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BLOOD PRESSURE:

If the force with which blood flows through blood vessels is chronically high, this can eventually damage those vessels and lead to a number of serious cardiovascular issues.

Ideal range: Less than 120/80 mm Hg

Sleep tight

Your heart's health depends on your sleep habits to a surprising degree, says Dr. Hayes. Research shows that poor sleep can contribute to obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes—all major risk factors for heart disease. The ideal amount for adults is seven to nine hours per night.

It's wise to turn in early too. A large study of people ages 43 to 74 found that those who fell asleep between 10 p.m. and 11 p.m. had the lowest risk of heart disease. People who went to sleep between 11 p.m. and 12 a.m. saw their risk rise by 12%, and those who hit the sheets after midnight had a 25% greater risk.

Offload any stressors you can

Stress is associated with an increased risk of diabetes and high blood pressure and promotes inflammation; all those can lead to a higher risk of cardiovascular disease. "If there's something in your life that you can get rid of or minimize to lower your stress levels, do so," says Dr. Hayes.

That said, some stress is inevitable, so it's also important to tame your body's *response* to stress, Dr. Hayes says. Learning the first signs of stress can help you defang it: Maybe you clench your teeth or take shallower breaths; when you notice that happening, ask yourself why you're tense in that moment and try to relax and breathe slowly and deeply.

Consider your health history and life stage

Autoimmune diseases like lupus and rheumatoid arthritis, radiation treatment for breast cancer, and depression all up the risk of heart disease. Menopause raises the risk too, because the production of estrogen (a heart protector) declines.

You may be surprised to discover that pregnancy complications—even if you had them decades ago—also boost your chances of developing heart problems later in life. These include hypertension or diabetes during pregnancy, preeclampsia, eclampsia, delivering a baby that's small for its gestational age, and preterm delivery. "Be sure to let your doctor know if you've experienced any of these," says Dr. Hayes.

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Move more

Exercise is powerful medicine for your heart: It lowers blood pressure, raises the good kind of cholesterol (HDL), slows your heart rate over time, and does lots of other beneficial things. Guidelines call for 150 to 300 minutes of moderately intense exercise (running, cycling, power walking) per week.

In this case, more is more. "If you can throw in two or three bouts of high-intensity training a week, it's even better for cardiovascular health," says Dr. Hayes. Add a couple of sessions a week of strength work, like resistance or weight training, suggests the American Heart Association. If you've been sedentary, start small and build from there. "Any kind of movement is better than no exercise at all," Dr. Hayes says.

WHAT A HEART ATTACK FEELS LIKE

During a heart attack, three-quarters of people of all genders experience chest pain, tightness, or heaviness. But women often have additional symptoms—nausea, sweating, a feeling of being unwell, or fatigue. You could mistake these atypical signs for a panic attack, chronic stress, or sleeplessness. "Heart attack is a great mimic," says Harlan M. Krumholz, M.D., a cardiologist and health care researcher at Yale University, who authored a study on this issue.

Research shows that 85% of women 55 and younger who have had heart attacks experienced other symptoms: sleep disturbances, unusual fatigue, anxiety, or arm weakness or pain weeks or months before the event. So think back, and pay attention to your Spidey sense when you feel as if something is wrong, says Dr. Krumholz.



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