- Heart

Pump it up

4 surprising ways healthy heart habits benefit your whole body

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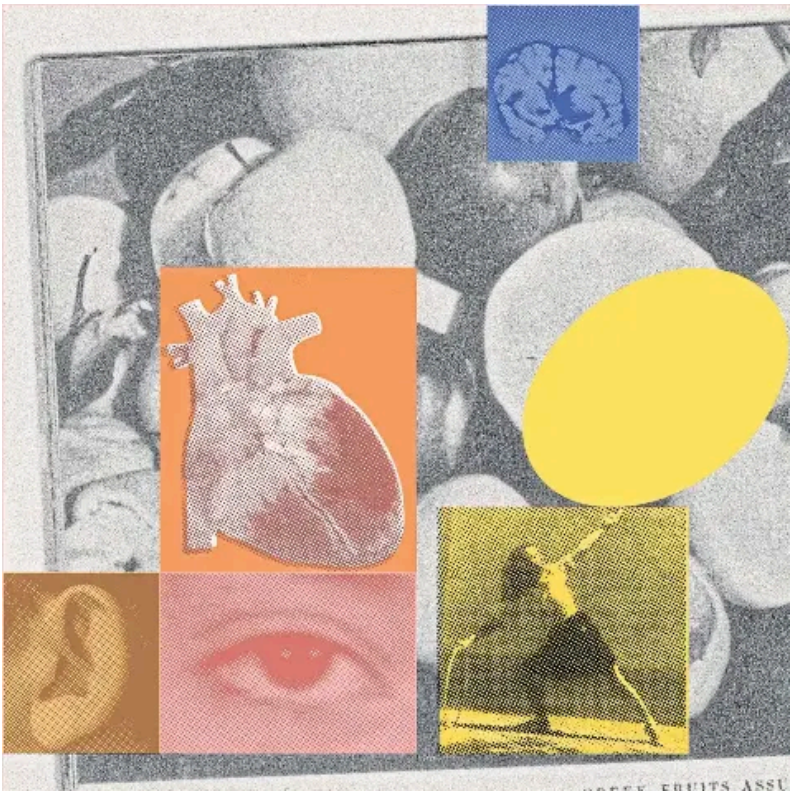
Doctors have long endorsed a handful of practices that protect against heart disease, the leading killer of adults in America. A new review shows that following this hearthealthy guidance also benefits the body in other surprising ways, including lowering the risk of cancer and dementia, improving mobility and even increasing the chances of a healthy pregnancy.



Researchers examined a decade of studies on “Life’s Simple 7”, a set of guidelines established in 2010 by the American Heart Association that reduce one’s chances of developing and dying of heart disease.

The guidelines include eating a heart-healthy diet, exercising, abstaining from smoking, and maintaining body weight, blood glucose, cholesterol and blood pressure within healthy limits. (Getting good sleep was added in 2022, when the list became “Life’s Essential 8”.)

The new review underscored how the measures collectively staved off cardiovascular disease, and also found that their positive health effects extended beyond the heart, said Liliana Aguayo, a research assistant professor of nursing at Emory University and the l ead author of the paper. Following the guidance may prevent a number of chronic diseases, as well as help maintain mobility, vision, hearing and other functions.

The benefits begin at the cellular level by reducing inflammation and most likely affecting other processes of ageing, too, said Anthony Molina, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Diego, who specialises in the science of ageing. Heart disease and many other chronic conditions are primarily diseases of ageing, but you can start accumulating risk earlier in life.

“From the top of your head to the tip of your toenail, pretty much everything is going to be better if you optimise your cardiovascular health,” said Dr Donald Lloyd-Jones, a professor of cardiology at Boston University who led the development of the original framework and worked on the new review.

PROTECTING YOUR BRAIN

The review found that good cardiovascular health, particularly in young adulthood and midlife, was associated with better cognition — including faster mental processing and greater verbal fluency — in middle age and later

in life. It was also associated with lower risks of dementia and depression.

One reason, doctors said, seems to be related to the vascular system, the network of blood and lymph vessels that carry oxygen, nutrients and infection-fighting agents throughout the body. Following the Life's Simple 7 guidelines helps ensure that your arteries, typically strong, elastic and open, don't become thick, stiff or blocked, as they do with heart disease.

Damage to blood vessels in the brain — caused by smoking, high blood sugar or plaque buildup, for example — can increase the risk of stroke and some types of dementia, said Dr Alison Moore, the chief of the division of geriatrics, gerontology and palliative care at the University of California, San Diego.

MAINTAINING MOBILITY

By the same token, Moore said, damage to the brain's blood vessels and those in the peripheral vascular system, which includes blood vessels in the arms, hands, legs and feet, can affect how fast you walk, your grip strength and your ability to stand up from a chair.

Following heart-health guidance affects mobility in other ways, too. Muscle mass, strength and function decrease with age, said Sameera Talegawkar, a professor of exercise and nutrition sciences at George Washington University. Regular exercise, one of the Life's Simple 7 practices, can help preserve strength and muscle mass.

Similarly, Talegawkar's research has shown that the plant-based diets recommended for heart health, like the Mediterranean and "DASH" diets, may protect against physical declines associated with age, including slower gait, frailty and reduced grip strength. This may be, in part, because the nutrients in such diets help combat inflammation and other types of cell damage.

PRESERVING VISION AND HEARING

The factors that maintain the arteries feeding your heart are the same ones that keep tiny capillaries all over your body healthy, said Dr Susan Spratt, a professor of medicine at Duke University. These tiny capillaries deliver essential nutrients and oxygen, without which cells may face stress or death, which in turn undermines organ function.

For example, Spratt said, high glucose, cholesterol and inflammation — all factors relevant to heart health — could cause capillaries in the ear to become clogged. That could lead to nerve damage or death, increasing the risk for hearing loss. If enough oxygen isn't getting to the retina in the eye, that can lead to bleeding and vision loss.

"Everything really does tie back to, how do we keep our vessels healthy?" Spratt said.

A HEALTHY PREGNANCY

Good cardiovascular health reduces the chances of pregnancy complications, including preeclampsia, gestational diabetes and preterm births.

Some complications relate to the health of the placenta, an organ full of blood vessels that helps nourish the growing fetus.

"If you don't have healthy vasculature, you can't build as healthy of a placenta," Spratt said.

In addition, pregnancy is a huge strain on the heart, said Dr Jennifer Haythe, a cardiologist at NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center. Cardiac output (how much blood the heart pumps per minute) and blood volume both increase significantly during pregnancy. Pregnant women who have poor cardiovascular health may have a difficult time manageing those changes, Haythe said.

Women who experience complications during pregnancy are at elevated risk of developing heart disease later in life, Haythe said, and they may pass on increased health risks to their children. Research has found, for example, that poor cardiovascular health in pregnant women was strongly associated with poor cardiovascular health in their children during early adolescence.

And good cardiovascular health at a younger age reduces the likelihood of cardiovascular disease in adulthood.

"We can start improving our health from conception all the way to very old ages," Aguayo said. "It's never too little or too late."

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