

Celebrating Healthy Heart

Heart Month has a long history dating back to the 1960s when it was initiated by the American Heart Association (AHA) in the United States expanding internationally today. This is a month-long initiative focused on heart health and cardiovascular disease (a catch all term for all diseases affecting the heart and blood vessels) prevention. It aims to educate individuals about the importance of maintaining a healthy heart and making lifestyle choices that support cardiovascular well-being. Heart disease remains a leading cause of death worldwide, and this observance seeks to reduce its impact through awareness and action.

The heart beats about 2.5 billion times over the average lifetime, pushing millions of gallons of blood to every part of the body. This steady flow carries with it oxygen, fuel, hormones, other compounds, and a host of essential cells. It also whisks away the waste products of metabolism. When the heart weakens, essential functions fail, some almost instantly. Given the heart's never-ending workload, it's a wonder it performs so well, for so long, for so many people. But it can also fail, brought down by a poor diet and lack of exercise, smoking, infection, unlucky genes, and more.

A key problem is atherosclerosis. This is the accumulation of pockets of cholesterol-rich gunk inside the arteries. These pockets, called plaque, can limit blood flow through arteries that nourish the heart — the coronary arteries — and other arteries throughout the body. When plaque breaks apart, it can cause a heart attack or stroke.

Although many people develop some form of cardiovascular disease as they get older, it isn't inevitable. A healthy lifestyle, especially when started at a young age, goes a long way to preventing cardiovascular disease. Lifestyle changes and medications can nip heart-harming trends, like high blood pressure or high cholesterol, in the bud before they cause damage. And a variety of medications, operations, and devices can help support the heart if damage occurs.

Improving heart health involves making conscious choices to reduce risk factors and adopt heart-healthy habits. Here are some ways to promote heart health during Heart Month and beyond:

- **Eat a Balanced Diet:** Consume a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy products. Limit saturated and trans fats, sodium, and added sugars.
- **Exercise Regularly:** Engage in physical activity for at least 150 minutes per week. Activities like walking, cycling, and swimming improve cardiovascular fitness.
- **Quit Smoking:** If you smoke, seek support to quit smoking. Smoking is a major risk factor for heart disease.
- **Manage Stress:** Practice stress-reduction techniques such as mindfulness, meditation, or yoga to reduce the impact of stress on your heart.

- **Monitor Blood Pressure:** Check your blood pressure regularly and work with your healthcare provider to manage it within a healthy range.
- **Control Cholesterol:** Maintain healthy cholesterol levels by following a heart-healthy diet and, if necessary, taking prescribed medications.
- **Maintain a Healthy Weight:** Achieve and maintain a healthy weight through a combination of balanced eating and regular physical activity.
- **Limit Alcohol Consumption:** If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation. Excessive alcohol consumption can contribute to heart problems.
- **Get Adequate Sleep:** Aim for 7-9 hours of quality sleep nightly support heart health.

References: [CDC.gov/heartmonth](https://www.cdc.gov/heartmonth), [nhlbi.nih.gov/education/american-heart-month](https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/education/american-heart-month)

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Mediterranean Layer Dip

Heart Healthy Party Snack or a side dish

Ingredients:

- 2 16 ounces your favorite hummus, suggest plain and garlic
- 2-14 ounces of Tabouleh Salad

Directions:

- *In an 8X8 baking dish alternating layers with hummus on bottom layer, end with tabouleh for top layer.
- *Serve with wheat crackers, whole wheat wraps, pita chips or raw vegetables.

Dietitians Tip:

For best flavor and texture, make this layer dip close to the serving time.

Nutrition Information: 1/3 cup serving: Calories 165; Total Fat 9g; Saturated Fat 1g; Sodium 390mg, Carbohydrates 14g; Fiber 4g, Added Sugar 4g; Protein 6g.

Recipe from Hannaford Dietitian Archives