

PUMP up Your Health

BY BARBI WALKER

Improving Your Circulatory System

February is synonymous with the heart – everywhere you turn in the weeks leading up to Valentine's Day, you will find much to remind you of the organ that can make you weak in the knees. Candy hearts, heart-shaped chocolate boxes, Valentine's cards – with all of the visual reminders, February is the perfect time to think about your heart's health status.

Remember, the heart doesn't work alone – it needs the rest of the circulatory system to bring it all together. The circulatory system isn't just the heart and lungs; it also includes the system of veins and arteries that deliver oxygen and nutrients to all of your body's vital organs. **The adult circulatory system carries roughly five liters of blood throughout the body and is made up of the cardiovascular (heart and lungs) system and the systemic (lymphatic) system.** According to the Franklin Institute's website, all parts must work well on their own in order for them to work well together.

Phoenix-based registered dietitian, Maya Nahra, RD, LD, agrees and explains that keeping the entire circulatory system healthy is key to overall health. "Oxygen and nutrition are carried by blood, and the circulation system delivers these to the heart and distributes nutrients to the body," Nahra said.

Poor diet, lack of exercise and smoking are all well-known culprits for harming the circulatory system, but Nahra sees overconsumption of processed foods to be just as harmful to the circulatory system, and the body as a whole.

"Too much processed foods wear down the arteries because your body sees them as a non-food item," she said.

Healthy circulation is needed to get nutrients to the right place, as well as disposing of the "garbage" or waste products from the blood. In "YOU: The Owner's Manual: An Insider's Guide to the Body that Will Make You Healthier and Younger" by doctors Mehmet Oz and Michael Roizen, the authors point out that arterial aging, or damaged arteries, slows down your memory and your sex life, and hampers the proper function of your other organs. Having an unhealthy circulatory system causes your entire body to slow down.

According to Oz and Roizen, most Americans (and Asians and Europeans, for that matter) can expect at least a 50 percent reduction in the quality of their life due to arterial disease.

Taking time to get a massage can also help with circulation, lymphatic drainage, and relaxation. "Most of my clients see massage as part of their healthcare," says Amy Shapiro, a massage therapist and yoga teacher, who has been in the health and wellness industry for over two decades. The long-term health benefits of massage come from getting them regularly, not the once or twice-a-year treat, Shapiro adds.

Nahra suggests improving your circulation by including the following four nutrients in your regular diet: Vitamin E, Vitamin C, Vitamin B3 and lycopene.

Vitamin E can be found in pumpkin seeds, olive oil and almonds. This vitamin reduces blood's "stickiness," which makes it less likely to attach to the arterial walls and create plaque buildup.

Vitamin C (ascorbic acid) is found in citrus fruits like oranges and grapefruit, as well as cabbage, tomatoes, peppers, dark green vegetables, strawberries and mangos. The flavonoids in these foods strengthen

capillary walls, making them stronger and more resistant to damage. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), flavonoids have antioxidative and antimicrobial effects; they may also play a role in preventing cancer and maintaining overall heart health.

Vitamin B3, also known as niacin, is effective in improving circulation and reducing cholesterol levels in the blood. The University of Maryland Medical Center (UMMC) lists beets, brewer's yeast, fish, salmon, tuna, sunflower seeds, and peanuts as the best dietary source for this vitamin. Nahra adds that whole grains, not refined grains like those in white bread, are good sources as well.

Lycopene is found in watermelon and tomatoes. Nahra explains that lycopene and Vitamin E help prevent plaque buildup on the arterial walls.

By making these nutrients a priority in your daily diet and exercising at least 30 minutes three times a week, you can ensure your circulatory system is working well.

Let the month of the heart be about everything that makes it flutter, from vitamins to romance – and enjoy the chocolate too!

SOURCES

awakenedreconnection.com, fi.edu, Maya E. Nahra, RD, LD, umm.edu
You, The Owner's Manual. Roizen, Dr. Michael F., and Oz, Dr. Mehmet C.

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