

Heart group lists 7 essentials for heart health

January 20 2010, By JAMIE STENGLER , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Here are the seven secrets to a long life: Stay away from cigarettes. Keep a slender physique. Get some exercise. Eat a healthy diet and keep your cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar in check.

Research shows that most 50-year-olds who do that can live another 40 years free of stroke and [heart](#) disease, two of the most common killers, says Dr. Clyde Yancy, president of the American Heart Association. The heart association published the advice online Wednesday in the journal Circulation.

The group also is introducing an online quiz to help people gauge how close they are to the ideal. If you fall a bit short, it offers tips for improving.

"These seven factors - if you can keep them ideal or control them - end up being the fountain of youth for your heart," said Dr. Donald M. Lloyd-Jones, a cardiologist who was lead author of the statement. "You live longer, you live healthier longer, you have much better quality of life in older age, require less medication, less medical care."

Specifically, those with ideal [cardiovascular health](#) can answer yes to the following seven questions:

- Never smoked or quit more than one year ago.
- [Body mass index](#) less than 25.

- Get at least 150 minutes of [moderate exercise](#) or 75 minutes of [vigorous exercise](#) each week.
- Meet at least four of these dietary recommendations: 4 1/2 cups of fruit and vegetables a day; two or more 3.5-ounce servings a week of fish; drink no more than 36 ounces of sugar-sweetened beverages a week; three or more 1-ounce servings of fiber-rich [whole grains](#) a day; less than 1,500 milligrams a day of salt.
- Total cholesterol of less than 200.
- Blood pressure below 120/80.
- Fasting [blood glucose](#) less than 100.

The online quiz calculates a score based on the answers, 10 being the ideal.

Doctors say the quiz is a good way for people to get a handle on how they're doing, especially since people often think they're doing better than they actually are.

The heart association found just that in a recent survey that showed 39 percent of Americans thought they had ideal heart health, yet 54 percent of those had been told they had either a heart disease risk factor or needed to make a lifestyle change to improve heart health, or both.

With America's obesity epidemic, weight especially is a pitfall for patients trying to meet these seven health factors, doctors say.

"Many people are surprised to find out how overweight they may be," said Dr. Randal Thomas, director of the cardiovascular health clinic at the Mayo Clinic.

Lloyd-Jones, also chair of the preventive medicine department at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, said, "People I think are far too accepting of their waistlines."

Thomas praises the online tool for giving people a score so they'll have something to work toward. It offers advice for problem areas: for instance, advising someone who's over weight to set a goal of losing a pound a week by burning up to 3,500 more calories than are taken in.

Yancy, the heart association president and medical director of the Baylor Heart and Vascular Institute in Dallas, said the organization has a goal for 2020 of improving cardiovascular health of Americans by 20 percent while reducing deaths from cardiovascular diseases and stroke by 20 percent.

He said that in the last decade, there's already been a nearly 40 percent reduction in death from heart disease and a nearly 35 percent reduction in death from stroke. He said those goals were achieved with improvements in treatments and prevention.

Linda Alvarado, 54, of Houston, said she knows how hard - and important - the changes can be. After having a quadruple bypass at the age of 47, she improved her diet and exercise, losing 40 pounds. Recently though, with a new 40-minute commute, some of those diet and exercise commitments have been put aside. While she's kept the lost pounds off, she would like to lose five more pounds.

"It's really up to you," Alvarado said.

More information: American Heart Association's My Life Check, <http://www.heart.org/MyLifeCheck>

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